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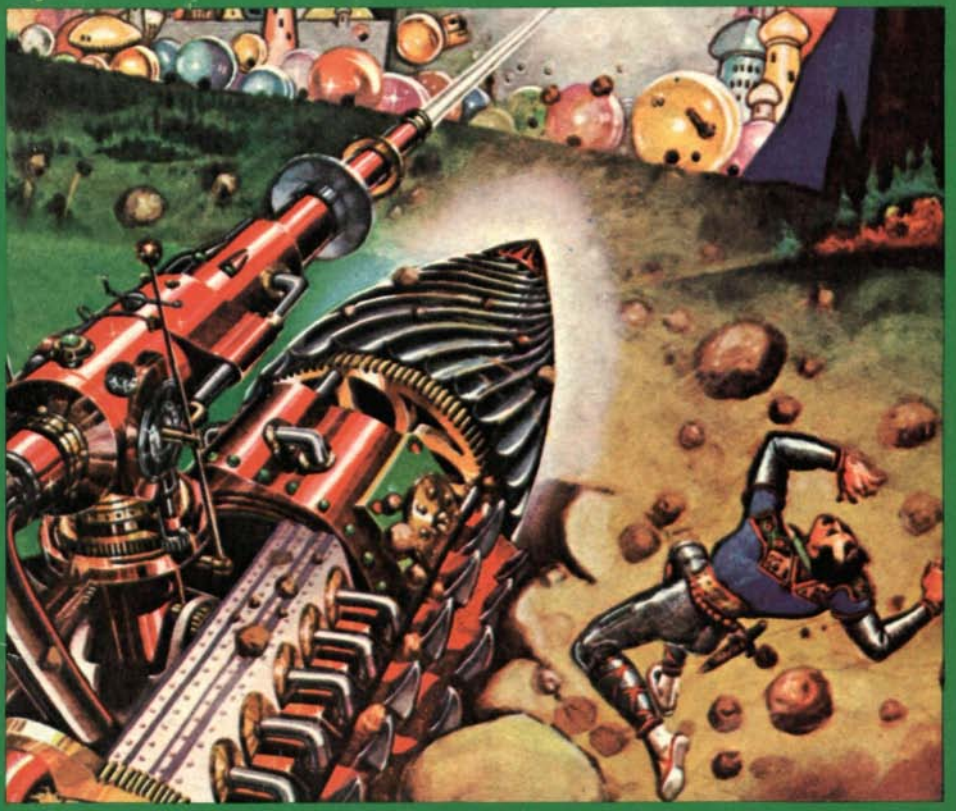

LUNAR VENGEANCE
by Thornton Ayre

MADCAP OF MARS
by Festus Pragnell

WHEN THE DARKNESS CAME
by William De Lisle

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VALLEY OF THE BLACK SUN

by Leroy Yerxa

The Whimsies were her slaves; she their queen

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A GREAT NEW COLLECTION

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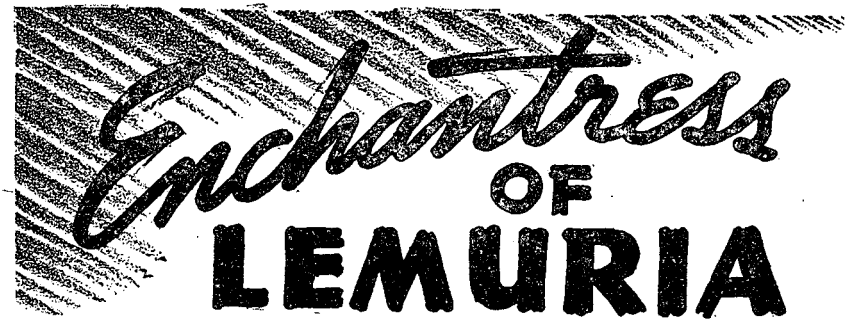

by STANTON A. COBLENTZ

"I'M at the club, Will. Why not come down and we'll have one of our old-time tete-a-tetes over the dinner table?" I listened expectantly for Will Claybrook's voice in the receiver.

As it came to me now across the wire, it struck me as strained, remote, and singularly lacking in interest, almost like a voice from some other world.

"No—no—can't. All tied up—can't get away—not one minute."

"Well then, maybe tomorrow?"

"No, not tomorrow. Not any evening. I'm too busy, Tom. Better come up here if you want to see me . . . Good-bye!"

Had it been any one but Will, I would have muttered, "To hell with him!", and promptly turned to something else. But I was used to Will and his ways; he and I had been chums since we were freshmen at college; and knowing that he was doubtless deep in some new experiment, I determined to step into his laboratory that evening. I had been away on a long business trip and I was anxious to see him; he was my best friend.

He had already been working at inventions for more than ten years. Ever since his graduation from college, when he had been employed as an engineer by the Rowney Bridge and Construction Works, he had been spending his spare hours in his small but well equipped home laboratory. "Rod-and-Shuttle Claybrook" was the nickname some of the boys gave him; although to his intimates, of course, he was always simply "Will."

I can still see him as he was in those days, a gangling six-footer, with a rail-thin body, a slight stoop, clothes perpetually shabby, and a long, lean, bespectacled face with a gigantic domed forehead and clear blue eyes with as innocent and yet intense and alive a light as I have ever seen in any human countenance.

But I doubt if there were many who could understand that rarely intelligent

WILL CLAYBROOK invented a means of seeing deep into the earth—and saw an incredible city far underground; and an incredibly lovely girl too

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and eager soul, whose one passion, whose one devotion was science, to such an extent that he lived like a hermit and hardly seemed aware of the existence of the so-called "gentler sex".

It was my own confident belief that Will would end in a position high among the world's great inventive geniuses. It might take him years; but from what I had seen of his Multi-Tone Pocket Radio Receiver, his Manganese-Nickel Airplane Protective Antennae and his Super-Magnetic Sound Detector, I expected him to take a place side by side with Marconi and Edison.

Most of all, I had been impressed by the chemical which he named Blue Nitrolene. I know little of the formula of this accursed substance, except that it was a compound of nitrogen, carbon, sulphur and phosphorus; but I have seen how it acted as an *atomic catalyzer*. That is to say, the heavier and more complex atoms broke down in its presence, to the accompaniment of an enormous release of energy; gold could literally be converted into iron, silver into lead, etc.

NEVER will I forget the time when, under careful control, Will injected a milligram of the sea-blue compound into a glass container filled with fifty pounds of steel. Instantly there was such a seething and bubbling that the metal disappeared in a mist, the glass melted, a furnace heat encompassed us, and, had it not been for the immediate application of a powerful stream of water, the laboratory and its occupants might have been written of in the past tense.

"Good heavens, Will," I exclaimed, when I had begun to recover from the shock, "what's the object? Suicide and murder?"

"Guess I measured the damned stuff wrong. Might have put in a tenth of a milligram too much," he apologized, as he dolefully brushed back his thinning sandy hair.

"What you intend to do with it? Commit wholesale massacre?" I gibed.

"Well, in a sense," he returned, gravely. "Can't imagine anything better for wiping out an enemy in case of foreign invasion. But the Government, curse it, can't see things that way. Gave a demonstration to an agent night before last, and he swore he wouldn't handle it with a seven-mile pole. Seven-mile pole! That's the very phrase he used!"

"Can't blame him! That's how I feel, too!" I grunted.

Nevertheless Will went on, in his solemn, heavy voice, to declaim against the imbecility of government agents.

ALL this was in my mind as I made my way expectantly toward Will's house at the outskirts of town. But, though I was anticipating some new invention, how little did I foresee what awaited me!

Will's eyes, as he mumbled a greeting, had an animation even beyond their usual enthusiastic glow. His whole face seemed illuminated; he moved with the oddly excited and yet preoccupied manner of a man who follows some inner light.

He scarcely took time to ask, perfunctorily,

"Well, how's things, Tom?" But, leading me in among the flasks and wires of the laboratory, he broke out, irrepressibly,

"Come, this way, this way, you're just in time. Got something to show you. Just step over this way, and you'll see *her*."

"Her?" I echoed, wondering if my friend could be suffering from a brain storm.

A look of pleasure, almost of delight

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radiated from that thin, intellectual face.

"Yes, her," he repeated; and I noticed that his features had indefinably softened. "The sweetest, most charming, most beautiful—but come, you'll see for yourself!"

His tones, his manner, it came to me with a shock, were no longer those of the woman-shunning hermit. They were those of a man in love!

But had my friend gone crazy? For surely no maiden, however ethereal, could be hiding among the wheels, rods and tubes of the laboratory! There was scarcely space for a cat to conceal itself!

"Quick, or she'll go away!" he directed, impatiently; and pointed to the eye-piece of an instrument that reminded me of a hand telescope, except that it was turned earthward, and was connected with a long series of prisms and lenses and with an intricacy of wires that made a low continuous whirring.

He turned a dial, and a blue light widened at the base of the machine. There was a crackling as of remote muffled thunder; a green spark shot up and died. But I still wondered what vagary had possession of Will as I took my place at the eyepiece and peeped through with a squint.

"Now, now, quick, tell me! What do you see?" he popped out, impatiently.

"Not a darned thing!" I returned. For all that I could make out was a confusion of dancing lights and shadows.

"Wait, I've got to adjust it to your eyes!" he went on, giving the dial another twist.

Again the lights and shadows danced; then gradually they began to take definite shape, and I had the sensation of one who peers through opera glasses at a remote stage.

"Well now, now do you see?" Will demanded. "Do you see *her?*"

I did not see any *her*. But what I did observe was enough to make me wonder if we were not both out of our heads. Surely, it was all an illusion, an hallucination! Those incredible sights were not real, could not be real!

IT seemed to me that I was looking down into an enormous cavern in the earth; a cavern as wide as whole counties and as deep as a mountain gorge. Just below me (or so it appeared, as I stared through the glass) a city spread, of such a construction that at first I did not know if it were a city at all. In fact, I might have mistaken it for some outlandish vegetable growth, had it not been for the weird silvery light that suffused it, in places tinged with amber, lavender or pale green.

The palaces (for so I thought of them) were all gracefully curved, some of them shaped like gigantic bubbles, some of them like immense mushrooms that glowed iridescently with an inner illumination. Here was a group of little blue-tinted dwellings that looked oddly like a cluster of hydrangeas; yonder was a domed temple that may have been of glass, and that changed gradually in color through pink and rose to violet and indigo. On curving walks that branched among the fairy-like buildings, little shapes that I took to be men and women were moving in a leisurely fashion; but they appeared too remote to be observed in detail.

"Well, now do you see *her?*" Will's excited voice dinned in my ears.

I was too fascinated by what I did see to pay any heed to those words.

"Oh, Lord, just look what I've done!" exclaimed my friend, slapping his thigh in intense irritation. "Switched the dial back to 'Distance.' Of course, you

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don't see her. What an idiot I am! Well here, now you'll get a close-up!"

A sharp whirring rang out in my ears; the bubble towers vanished in a surge of reeling shadows; then, after a second or two, a new scene formed itself before my eyes.

"At last! At last do you see?" Will fairly shouted.

I was looking down at an alabaster court between two of the great mushroom-shaped buildings. At one side, the rainbowed spray of a fountain was visible. I could see that the walls of one of the palaces was covered with strangely beautiful painted inscriptions; while, upon glowing pedestals, I noticed the busts of venerable-looking bearded men, and women with faces like the Venus de Milo.

"Now, you numbskull! Tell me, do you see her?" insisted Will, with growing impatience.

"All I see is the busts," I reported, wondering if my poor friend could be so far lost as to have fallen in love with a stone image.

"Then she's gone away!" he groaned. "She's gone away! Didn't I tell you to hurry?"

EVEN as he spoke, however, my attention was caught by a figure that glided slowly into sight. And instantly I understood what it was that had enchanted Will. I, too, though I had believed my romantic days well behind me, felt my pulses fluttering just a little at sight of that queenly being.

But "queenly," I am afraid, is too pale a word to describe this sorceress who, with movements like music, passed briefly across my view. Not that there was anything about her of conscious witchery; she was young, not more than seventeen or eighteen; and her face, with the big lustrous violet eyes shining from beneath a moderate forehead crowned with auburn hair, beamed with the smiling innocence of one who is wholly untainted and unspoiled.

I fear, however, that it is beyond my powers to convey the impression of beauty she gave, more like a Grecian goddess than a mere mortal as she ambled on her way, clad in a robe of some shimmering cobweb substance that reached barely to her knees and left the shapely calves exposed above her sandaled feet. Her complexion was pale—almost of the traditional milky white; and her expression, as she burst momentarily into laughter (almost as if to ridicule me as I watched her!), was indescribably clear and bright.

I am ashamed to report it, but I was left babbling and incoherent as she drifted from view, followed by a peacock with magnificent outspread fan.

"Ah! So you've seen her!" exclaimed Will, not needing the confirmation of my words. "Isn't she just about like heaven itself?"

I nodded; while Will greedily took my place at the eyepiece. But after a glance, he sighed,

"She's gone, curse the luck! She's gone! Don't know when I'll get a glimpse of her again!"

But for a long while he continued to stare steadily through the instrument.

MEANWHILE I was gradually regaining my sanity, and a thousand and one questions were popping into my mind. What was the great cavern I had just seen? Where was it? What were the mushroom palaces? Who was the maiden on the rainbow-fountained court? How had Will been able to see them through his instrument? Were they things that existed on some other planet? Were they mere reproductions, through a time machine, of segments of a remote past?

These thoughts, and others as fantas-

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tic, flashed through my mind in rapid succession; but it was long before I could wean my friend away from the eyepiece and pry any semblance of an answer from his lips.

"Why, it's all very simple," he explained, as he absently fingered a dial marked *Remote Control.* "It's all done through the Pellucid Depth Ray."

"What under heaven's that?"

"Guess you wouldn't understand if I told you, Tom. It's a sort of subterranean television machine."

"Subterranean television machine?"

"Yes. In other words, a machine to see through the earth. I thought you would have guessed. What do you think you were looking at, anyway, except a scene ten or fifteen miles below your feet?"

"Ten or fifteen miles below my feet? My God, Will!"

"Oh, the Pellucid Depth Ray can see much further than that," he declared, with an expression that seemed to say, "This is mere child's play."

"But how? How is it possible? No ray known—not even the cosmic rays—have anything like that penetrating power."

"Well, the word ray is perhaps a misnomer. Let's go back to the principle of television. Certain scenes are converted by electrical means into mere vibrations in the ether, from which they are converted back again into scenes upon a screen. In the same way, the events occurring beneath the earth's surface give rise to faint—very faint—electrical pulsations, which I am able to pick up by means of my machine so as to reproduce the original scenes. Of course, I have to amplify the impressions more than a million times. But is there anything more surprising about that than about other accomplishments in television and radio?"

"No, no, I suppose not," I admitted, reluctantly. "But how did you find this cavern in the earth? And what in thunder do you think it is, anyhow?"

"You know as well as I what it is," he returned, with a shrug. "Guess it'll take a whale of a lot of investigating to clear up that mystery. But how did I find it? Simplest thing on earth! Merely turned the Pellucid Depth Ray straight underground, looking for whatever I could find, until I came across this wonderful cavern. However, it was days before I saw any sign of *her.*"

"Forget about her!" I counselled, not liking the dreamy look that had come into his eyes. "It won't do you any good, Will, brooding over a girl you'll never see except at long distance—"

"Oh, won't I!"

HE shot toward me with electrical suddenness; and flung me a glance that was challenging, almost defiant.

"What's to prevent me from going right down into the cavern—yes, and meeting her face to face? What's to prevent me, I'd like to know?"

"Holy Jerusalem, Will! You don't mean to say—"

"I mean to say I've got it all planned! What do you think I've been so damned busy about, anyway? It's taken me days of slow labor, but the Depth Ray has located a small tunnel that leads up from the main gallery, connecting with one of the natural caverns in the Whitley Range a few miles west of here."

"And you think—think you can find that cavern?"

"What's to prevent me, with the Depth Ray for guide?"

"But you wouldn't be damned fool enough—"

Sharply, almost angrily, his interruption flashed out.

"See here, Tom, better keep your comments to yourself! When I've made up my mind on any matter, then it's

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made up—and I was never more set on anything in my life than on this expedition down to the Great Cavern, as I call it. Just look! I've got everything arranged!"

He flung open a small closet door, revealing a neatly packed knapsack.

"Everything I need is there!" he rumbled on. "Concentrated food; water; flashlights; a camera; photographs of our country, and so on. Day after tomorrow I set out!"

I stared at him, stunned.

"Day after tomorrow? Mean to say you're going to do this alone—and on foot? Why, man, you'll never come out alive!"

"It's worth any risk," he declared, with a smile. "Yes, well worth any risk! Just think what an opportunity—to explore another world!"

"But good heavens, Will, why all the rush? Why don't you wait a while? Why not organize a party—"

The light in his eyes was far-off, exalted, almost ecstatic. "No, no, I can't wait! Can't! Not one hour more than need be! I must get down there to see—to see *her!*"

As I saw the flushed, nervous manner in which he began ranging about the room, I knew that arguments would be futile. That lovely creature in the Great Cavern had caught him beyond my power to save! And when, a little later, I bade him farewell after vainly trying to extract some further details of his plans, it was with the feeling of one who leaves a soon-to-be-executed friend.

To this day, I doubt if he was fully aware of me as I sorrowfully shook his hand and slipped from the room.

"See, there she is again!" he cried, as he took his place at the eyepiece of his infernal machine. "There she is again! Good Lord! Isn't she the most glorious thing God ever put on this earth!"

CHAPTER II

A Challenge to Death

TWO or three days after my talk with Will, a sensation was caused by the discovery of his Brighton coupé, parked in a barren gorge of the Whitley range, not far from the entrance of one of the many limestone caverns that thread the region.

As no man in his right mind would deliberately abandon his car in that desolate district, it was assumed that he had met with mishap or foul play; and searchers, scouring the hills or exploring the caves with lanterns, expected nothing better than to come across his mutilated remains.

However, no trace of him was found, except for a penknife which had evidently been dropped by chance deep in one of the caves, and which some of the party believed may have belonged to Will. But this point was never definitely decided; and after a time, for want of clues, the hunt was abandoned, and "the mysterious disappearance of William Claybrook" was accepted as a thing beyond human explanation, and was gradually forgotten.

Doubtless many of you will remember the newspaper story of the rescue of William Claybrook and an unknown woman, who were on the verge of death by starvation and exposure, many months later. But little, really, is known of the story behind that news item, or of the mystery of the whereabouts of Claybrook during the intervening months. It was assumed that he had lived, somehow, in a mountain retreat, but was finally forced to seek civilization again when his food supply was destroyed in a landslide.

But now, after the passage of more than two years, I have persuaded Will to let me publish the true story of his

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extraordinary adventures in the subterranean world fifteen miles below the surface, for he did reach it.

I shall pass very briefly over the beginnings of his experience, since the sequel was so much more striking. After leaving his car, he plodded for hours through the caverns of the Whitley Range, weighed down with the fifty pounds of his pack, and guided by a map which he had made by means of the Pellucid Depth Ray.

From tunnel to remote connecting tunnel he forced his way by the beams of a flashlight; through passages so narrow that he had to crawl on hands and knees; over perilous watercourses; down sheer rock ledges, and into sections where no man had ever penetrated before. A dozen times he skirted the edge of death; fifty times he had to halt from exhaustion. Sometimes he lay on a limestone shelf for an hour or two of badly needed sleep; sometimes he fancied himself to be lost amid the labyrinths; but always he pressed on and on, and down and down and down—

IT may have been partly through good luck that he at last reached his goal; though he maintained that it was all a matter of careful planning. At any rate, at a depth of more than five miles he faced his supreme difficulty. The heat at this point was torrid, the heavy air almost unendurable. He had stripped to the waist, and yet sweated continually; but still he forced his way on—until stopped by a solid barricade of rock. This he had seen through the Ray machine; and this he had prepared for by means of a stick of dynamite.

Personally, I would never have had the nerve to insert a charge of high explosive in that subterranean recess; but Will was prepared for just this act; he lit a time-fuse; retreated to what he thought a safe distance, and waited with more confidence than most men in his situation would have shown.

In that narrow corridor, the force of the explosion must have been terrific; Will admits that he was momentarily stunned. But the next instant, recovering himself, he felt a cool breeze blowing over him, and knew that he had blasted open the entrance to the Great Cavern.

In the Cavern itself, all was coal-black—which did not surprise Will, for he knew that the lights went on and off periodically, as if by a clockwork arrangement—sixteen hours on, and eight off, with the regularity of the Old Faithful geyser.

"Good! Luck's with me!" he muttered to himself. Then cautiously he crept forward, feeling for his foothold inch by inch, for it would be unsafe to betray himself by a flashlight. After a perilous hour, he had groped his way out of the narrow corridor, and had the sense of great spaces opening about him, although everything was still as black as a blind man's world.

From his observations with the Depth Ray, he knew that he had come out on the side of a hill, which he had termed the Golden Ridge, because of its peculiar tint. It was now his purpose to feel his way down the hillside, toward a cluster of bubble palaces; then, upon the return of the light, he thought, he could safely introduce himself to the natives.

But he had been a little too sanguine. No sooner had he entered the Cavern than a confusion of cries met his ears —cries of consternation and terror, which arose in a great disturbing chorus, some near, some far, punctuated by sharper screams and calls, as if the entire populace had been aroused.

This, however, Will was prepared for in a measure, since he could hardly

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have expected the noise of the explosion to go unnoticed. Yet he had not anticipated such a general alarm.

Beneath the overtone of agitated cries, there were rustlings and flutterings in the night; sounds as of feet pattering, of robes swishing, of excited movements to and fro.

Warily the intruder began to creep down the hill, feeling his way inch by inch; but he was conscious of presences all around him, of stealthy forms moving close at hand through the darkness. He had to use all his power of will not to betray himself by turning on a flashlight; but at the same time he felt, he almost knew that his movements were no secret to the invisible watchers.

"Gulm titsum gulm!"

THESE may not have been the exact syllables of the challenge that rang forth, abruptly, almost within arm's length; but these were the words, as nearly as Will could afterward recall them.

Terrified, he stopped short.

"Gulm titsum gulm!"

Twice the phrase was repeated. Then a greenish phosphorescent light, larger than a man's head, broke out just in front of him, not more than five feet away, with a dull uncanny illumination by which he could vaguely see a crowd of staring faces.

Wonder, dread and dismay were registered in those countenances. He could see how some of the spectators started back in repugnance, with cries as of men who have unexpectedly encountered a dangerous beast in the dark.

Sliding down to his hands and knees, Will tried to slip off into the shadows. But another phosphorescent greenish light burst out, and he saw that he was surrounded.

If ever he regretted his rash adventure, it was at that moment. His heart hammered; his breath came fast; he thought with bitter longings of the tunnel he had just left.

A moment passed, while he listened to the voices whispering; whispering rapidly and sibilantly, in that same unknown tongue. Then, out of the green-streaked shadows, a tall figure approached, carrying a machine that resembled a large insect-sprayer. He pressed a little bulb; a long tube, like a rifle-barrel, shot out toward the startled observer; and from this tube a rain of fine vapor was showered over Will.

The victim coughed; gasped; had a sensation as of strangling, with an odor as of garlic in his nostrils; then felt a numbness coming over all his limbs, and sank to earth, possessing no more power over his muscles than if they had belonged to some other person.

"Bult zimplol thim!" he heard a voice, rapid and excited. And two figures bent down and slipped heavy straps about him, until he was scarcely able to squirm; after which he felt himself being lifted, and borne away on several pairs of stout shoulders.

NOT until long afterward did he learn how he had been so swiftly found and captured. He did not as yet realize that his presence and exact location had been revealed by a machine known as the "Man Detector," which recorded the faint electrical vibrations given off by the human brain, and so made it possible to discover the exact whereabouts of any man at a distance of several hundred yards.

Likewise, he did not know that the vapor-showering machine shot out a gas which, while leaving no permanent effects, temporarily paralyzed the mo-

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tor nerve centers, but left the brain otherwise unimpaired. All that Will really understood, in that terrifying moment of his capture, was that he was helpless in the hands of beings endowed with unheard-of scientific powers.

For possibly two or three miles they carried him, through thoroughfares absolutely blank except for the circles of greenish phosphorescent light. He had no idea where he was being borne; he only knew that he was accompanied by a crowd, for he could hear the padding footsteps, the low voices whispering in that queer-sounding tongue. Where were they taking him? To what new terrors? To what inescapable doom?

While these thoughts were sweeping through his mind, suddenly he was dazed by a flare of lights. The pitchy gloom of midnight had given place all at once to the silvery glow of day. Dazzled, Will did not realize for a moment that this was but the normal end of one of the eight-hour periods of darkness, the beginning of one of the sixteen-hour intervals of light. In bewilderment and wonder, he was staring up at a ceiling a thousand feet above, on which multitudes of bulbs flamed in pleasing geometrical patterns. He noticed again, as he had done through the Depth Ray, that the ceiling was supported by concrete columns which, tapering upward like inverted funnels, were each many yards thick at the base and were separated by intervals of close to a quarter of a mile. But, most of all, he was amazed at the palaces.

Mushroom-shaped and bubble-like, as he had seen them from above, and glowing iridescently with a light from within, they were like the temples of a dream world; and were far more beautiful now, in their pastel colorings of cream and lavender and amber and sky-blue, than when seen by means of the Depth Ray.

In the courts, between the buildings, flowers such as Will had never seen before were blooming: orange-yellow roses as big as dahlias, and blue-and-gold dahlias as large as a man's lap, and rainbow-hued blossoms of types that Will had never seen before; while lemon-winged birds flitted among the trees and sang with a melody surpassing the nightingale.

Now that he had a chance to see his captors, his fears began to leave him. These men, with their clear blue eyes, broad high brows and sensitive open countenances, did not look as if they would inflict deliberate cruelty; although their lips were set, and there was a stern and determined look on their faces as they jogged along at an unhurried pace.

AFTER a time, they paused before the largest building of all—an edifice of many-domed crystal, with cupolas and spires that changed constantly in color, in a manner to outrival the chameleon. Will had a glimpse of something that looked like an elevated railway, which ran behind the building; multitudes of individuals were gliding back and forth upon a lacework bridge—a bridge composed of two great movable platforms, one running in each direction—the local means of solving the transportation problem!

He also had glimpses of other queer contrivances, including a deep chute from which men and women were hurled into air like corks from a popgun, to go drifting gracefully to the ground beneath shimmering parachutes. He was fascinated by the tubes which rose from the earth, and from which drafts of air were constantly pouring, as from the ventilators in the cabins of modern steamers; and, for the first time, it occurred to him that the temperature was pleasantly cool,

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although according to all calculations, considering the depth, it should have been insufferably hot.

But Will had little time for such thoughts and observations. He was carried through a small oblong doorway into the crystalline edifice; down a long arched corridor that glowed with translucent rose and gold, and into a great vaulted chamber where dozens of men in long flowing robes were squatted cross-legged on the floor.

On entering, each of Will's captors reached down and touched the floor three times with his left hand, while uttering what sounded like a mumbled prayer. Then, arising, they approached a platform in the center, where an impressive-looking individual was sitting, also cross-legged, upon a platform of purple velvet.

This dignitary, white-bearded and venerable-looking, and clad in a shining white mantle, looked down at the newcomers with a grave and yet benignant expression.

"Bludel? Bludel? Bludel?" he said, in a manner of gentle inquiry; and fixed Will with a gaze of patriarchal authority.

Will's attendants replied, with obvious meekness and respect; and pointed to him continually during the conversation, which lasted ten or fifteen minutes. One word kept recurring as they addressed the white-mantled one:

"Timur, Timur, Timur!"

Will could not but recognize this as the name or title of the magistrate—for such he took the figure on the platform to be. And he had the uneasy sense that his fate was being decided.

But the decision, when it was made, remained a mystery to Will. Timur leaned down, pointed to the captive and made a series of slow and sonorous pronouncements, while his followers listened deferentially. Then the men bent down once more, and each touched the floor three times with his left hand; after which they started away, bearing their captive, still paralyzed, down a long, dimly illuminated gallery that slanted into the depths of the earth.

CHAPTER III

The People of the Abyss

AFTER being carried through endless labyrinths, Will was locked in a subterranean room, where he was to remain a prisoner for many weeks, while being regularly fed and cared for. Each day a long-robed dignitary arrived, who spent hours with him, teaching him the native language and customs; and thus after a time he was able to solve the mystery of the Great Cavern, and to learn who its people were and how they had come to dwell underground.

The country was called Le-Mur; and its people were descendants of the ancient Lemurians, who had inhabited the Pacific continent that sank beneath the ocean thousands of years before. At the time of the disaster, when tidal waves and volcanic eruptions of unparalleled violence were laying the country waste, a ruling caste of thousands of men and women had been able to retreat underground to cavern shelters which they had prepared against precisely this emergency—scientists having foretold the cataclysm many years in advance.

Equipped with all manner of mechanical devices, they had been able to survive even when the disturbance had sealed the galleries by which they had hoped to return to the upper world. They manufactured their food synthetically, creating carbohydrates, proteins and edible fats by the transformation of the mineral oil of the

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earth. They had a system of interatomic lighting, which kept their homes illuminated with but slight expenditure of energy. They maintained a fanning and ventilating system which worked perfectly, aided by the constant release of oxygen from various metallic oxides. They cooled their galleries by electrical refrigeration, employing the earth's internal heat to generate the electricity. And they had gradually, in the course of many centuries, expanded their subterranean domains, which now reached for hundreds of miles, with interminable branching by-ways and corridors and occasional enormous caverns like the one which Will had discovered.

As generation after generation led its life underground, a prejudice had begun to arise against the sunlit world above—even a fear, a superstition against the People of the Upper Air, as the surface dwellers were known. In the early days, some of the Lemurians had indeed escaped from their cavern life, and had entered the "Upper Air," never to be heard of again.

But as time went by, such escapes had been severely frowned upon, and at length had been forbidden, under threat of death; the tunnels connecting with the earth's surface, which had been built long before, were carefully sealed, and the very secret of their location was locked in archives known only to the Committee of Elders. "Le-Mur for the Le-Murs!" was the motto. To make contact with the peoples of the Upper Air, reasoned the statesmen of the Caverns, would be to end Le-Mur's blessed isolation, and to bring down no one knew what manner of "foreign plagues and devils."

FOR many centuries, according to the accounts Will heard, the life of Le-Mur had really been blessed. In their bubble palaces, the people had led an existence that was wise, sane and beautiful; protected from overcrowding by scientific regulation of population; and shielded from want by an equitable system of distribution, which gave to every one all that he required of every commodity, and allowed to all alike ample time for recreation and for pursuit of art, learning, and personal hobbies.

But of recent years, decay had set in. The life of Le-Mur, although still as smooth as ever on the surface, had been penetrated by a deep, gnawing disease, which was fast chewing away at the foundations. This was not, indeed, told to Will by his instructor; but this he was to learn, in a striking fashion, after he had been in Le-Mur for three months and had, through studious application, acquired a fair knowledge of the language.

He had often wondered for what end he was being trained; and why such evident care had been taken to drill him in both writing and speaking Le-Murian. But he assumed that the natives desired to learn from him something of his own country—if a Martian explorer were to arrive in America, would our first thought not be to teach him English? The main question in Will's mind was whether, once his training was completed, he would be kept a prisoner; or whether he would be released, to explore the cavern-world, and perhaps—perhaps!—to meet the fascinating woman he had seen by means of the Depth Ray.

One day, after a long session with his instructor, who pronounced his work "Satisfactory! Very satisfactory!", he received a summons, which sounded through a little speaking tube high up on the wall:

"The Timur desires an audience, the Timur desires an audience with the man of the Upper Air! Let him follow the yellow line, and take the violet Running

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Platform at the left-hand side of the third corridor to the right!"

No sooner had these words been spoken than, with a loud clattering, Will's prison door burst open. Emerging, he saw a line of yellow light, which he followed down several curving galleries, until he came to a place corresponding, roughly, to a railroad station on earth. Dozens of movable platforms, laden with passengers, were twisting in and out and halting for brief intervals in a sort of general depot.

Finding the violet platform, which was unoccupied, he stepped aboard, and dropped into a little seat. Almost instantly, as if under intelligent guidance, it began to move, and Will was shot up through a sloping tunnel and out upon a sort of causeway in the Great Cavern, from which he looked down upon the mushroom buildings.

It was only a few minutes before he stopped at the palace of many-domed crystal, with the chameleon towers constantly changing in color; and there he was met by an attendant in a shimmering blue robe, who raised both hands in salute, according to a local custom, and then motioned him in through a small oblong doorway such as he had entered before.

ONLY a minute later, he was standing before the Timur—who, as Will now knew, was the legal ruler of all Le-Mur, a king with powers that were not, indeed, absolute, but were somewhat broader than those of the President of the United States.

Will was astonished to observe that he was being granted a private audience with this great dignitary; in fact, aside from four guards who stood, each with a long spear, at one corner of the room, he and the Timur were the only occupants of the great vaulted chamber.

As before, the sovereign was sitting cross-legged on a central platform; as before, he was impressive with his venerable appearance, white beard and shining white mantle.

For a moment, after Will's arrival, the Timur merely stood looking at him in a grave and troubled manner; and Will, trembling although he did his best to control himself, realized that some important announcement was in store, and that a crisis in his own life impended.

"Manu," the Timur at last said (this being an abberviation of "Man of the Upper Air"), "for ages all contact with your race has been prohibited. Primitives such as you Upper Air folk could only cause damage down here in Le-Mur. Through our earth-piercing radioscopes, we have been watching your doings for centuries; and what we have seen of your wars, revolutions and intrigues has not been such as to make us desire your closer acquaintance. In fact, I am empowered, by a special law, to consign any intruder from the Upper Air to the Obliteration Rooms—"

"Obliteration Rooms?" gasped Will, with a sinking sensation. "What on earth may they be?"

"The rooms where those who do not deserve life are pierced with the Paralyzing Needle, which brings oblivion. But have no fear, Manu. It is not for this that I have summoned you here. I believe that the Providence which governs us all has brought you down to us at the crucial moment, for you can be of great service to all Le-Mur. Do you wish to know how?"

The brows of the Timur were wrinkled with solemn lines as he spoke; his deep blue eyes narrowed thoughtfully with a look of sorrow in which there was at the same time a spark of hope.

"Are you willing to take chances, Manu? Are you ready to risk your life for the sake of Le-Mur?"

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As if to punctuate these words, the spears of the four guardsmen came down with a sudden clattering. Then, for a few seconds, a silence that seemed almost leaden ensued.

"Risk my life, O Timur?" queried Will, thinking that perhaps he had not properly caught the meaning of the words. "How so? For what reason?"

"You, Manu, can do what no native of Le-Mur can accomplish. Let me explain."

NERVOUSLY the Timur uncrossed and then crossed his legs again as he tilted his lean body far forward on his platform of purple velvet.

"First I must tell you some things about our country, Manu. We threaten today to split into halves—and a land that splits into halves is like an egg with its shell broken. My followers and I have tried to give the people a good rule, and to govern kindly and reasonably. But I have a great enemy, Murkambu by name, who has been organizing half of the land against me, and today threatens not only my own reign, but the well being of all Le-Mur."

The Timur shook his head sadly, and continued,

"The trouble has been brewing for centuries, and is only now coming to a head. You see, Murkambu represents the Science Party; and my followers and I are Anti-Science. Not that we are against science, actually; only that we believe that scientific advances should be restrained, that new inventions should be put to use only when they will be of value to the people as a whole.

"As you know, our civilization is already highly mechanized. We have not only machines, but machines to run the machines—and everything is managed so efficiently that we are hard pressed to find two hours' work a day to occupy the average able-bodied citizen. Under these circumstances, we hold that further labor-saving devices are worse than useless."

"Looks that way to me, too," concurred Will.

"Ah! So then you agree with me! Good!" exclaimed the Timur, his eyes darting lively fires at his visitor. "Then you'll be so much the better for the secret assignment!"

"What secret assignment?" demanded Will, apprehensively.

"I'm coming to that, I'm coming to that," the ruler rattled on. "First let me tell you about Murkambu and his Science Party. They believe every new invention should be used to the full, no matter how many men it leaves unemployed and how it throws our life out of its orbit. Whether or not we can digest it, it should be thrown on the market!—as if a man should devour all the food he could lay hands on, even when his stomach was full! Of course, the explanation is that Murkambu and his group—hogs that they are!—are bent on nothing but their private profits."

"But if every one has all he wants anyhow, why should they care about private profits?"

The Timur threw up his hands in a despairing gesture.

"Why, indeed, Manu, except that men have the appetites of hungry dogs, no matter how they are fed? However, Science or Anti-Science—that is after all a political issue, and should be settled reasonably. But a reasonable settlement is the last thing Murkambu wants. He is—to do the devil justice—as brilliant a leader as Le-Mur has ever seen. Owing to his genius for organization, his oratorical talents, his wealth and his unscrupulousness, he has formed a powerful revolutionary party, a real threat against the government of

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Le-Mur—in fact, it has already usurped hundreds of square miles of territory. The Science platform is, of course, only a rallying call, although it has added many wolves and vultures to the rebel ranks. But Murkambu's real desire is to overthrow the established order, to drive me from power, and to take control of the whole country!"

THE Timur tossed angrily on his purple platform as he spoke; his fists clenched and unclenched in nervous spasms. But there seemed to be no relevancy in his words as he went on, impulsively:

"So that is why—that is why, Manu, I have sent for you!"

"That is why you have sent for me?" repeated Will dully. "How so, O Timur?"

"It is like this," the ruler hastened. "Murkambu's faction is so powerful that I fear we may not be able to cope with it. Least of all, if it strikes suddenly—one of the 'terror-blows', which, I understand on the best authority, Murkambu has worked out in secret with his lieutenants. The stroke may be withheld indefinitely; or may fall at any time. That is, frankly, what worries me. If we could only learn the date of the impending outbreak, we would be in a better position to suppress it."

"But can you not learn, O Timur?"

The ruler sighed.

"Perhaps you can answer that for us, Manu. You see, we have already sent out many spies. But all were discovered by means of the Man Detector—which is very sensitive, and, as you know, reveals any human presence within several hundred yards. You, being from the Upper Air, are the only one who can get around this barrier—"

"But did the Man Detector not locate me the moment I entered your world, O Timur?"

A wan smile came to the sovereign's lips.

"That is not what I mean, Manu. Of course, your presence would be detected. But Murkambu and his Science men would have no reason to suspect you of being a government agent. You could claim to have escaped from us, and to be our enemy; and so could enter where none of us could go, and learn secrets hidden from our eyes. With skill and luck, you might even discover the intended date of the Revolution."

"So you wish me to be a spy, O Timur?"

"Call it what you will. But is it not for a noble purpose—to save our civilization from the plotters who scheme to wreck it?"

Will stared up at that tormented and yet benevolent face, marked with a patriarchal benignity; and had an instant conviction that the Timur had been speaking the truth, and did indeed represent the forces of light in their battle with evil.

"Do not let me coerce you, Manu," the voice went on, sorrowful and low. "I would not intimidate you, if I could—of what value to us would an agent be unless he went of his own free will?"

Over Will's mind there flashed a thought of the dangers involved; and his heart sank as he wondered how he could overcome the monstrous difficulties of maneuvering among strangers, a detective in an unknown world.

But the Timur had fixed him with a gaze that was imploring, almost magnetic. The two eyes fairly blazed with eagerness, with desire; and it seemed to Will that he could not bring to his tongue a protesting "No!" Besides, was there not some voice of adventure within him that cried out, "Yes, go, go!"

And so he heard himself replying, almost as if some automatic power within him had taken hold of his tongue:

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"Tell me more, O Timur—more of what you would have me do."

The Timur leaned forward again; smiled and grunted an approving:

"Good! I could see you were no coward, Manu!" And somehow, at those words, Will knew that he was committed to the adventure.

CHAPTER IV

At the Enemy's Castle

MURKAMBU, known by his friends as "The Oracle" and "The Shining Leader" and by his enemies as "The Fury," sat behind a great steel-topped desk in the Hall of Science of his private mansion. All about him, along the walls of the enormous domed room, were tiny models of machines—curious devices of wheels, coils, rods, boilers, and web-like masses of wires corresponding to nothing ever seen in the world above. Engines shaped like butterflies, and others that looked like giant frogs, and still others that were bat-shaped or spider-limbed or mosquito-like, dangled from cables suspended from the ceiling, giving the place a little of the appearance of a museum of monsters and monstrosities.

Thoughtfully Murkambu stroked his square, cleft chin with a lean, nervous hand; brushed back the long, dyed black hair that fell untidily about his wide, low forehead; and, with his hawk eyes glittering keenly on either side of his hooked nose, stared at an attendant who, clad in the mud-yellow of the servant class, had just entered through the oblong door at the further end of the room.

"What is it, Gramm?" he demanded, as the servant raised one hand high above his head in token of respect.

"Leader," said Gramm, in oiled, deferential tones, "it is nothing much. Only a fugitive who claims to have escaped the Timur's clutches, and begs leave to throw himself at your feet."

Murkambu leaned far back among the cushions of his chair, smiled faintly, and asked, indifferently:

"Why must he see me? Will not one of the sub-Councillors serve?"

"But this is a different sort of fugitive, O Leader. Do you not remember hearing of the man who came months ago from the Upper Air—"

Murkambu shot forward in his seat with a start. His flashing eyes were all alertness as he broke in.

"Oh, so the man from the Upper Air has escaped and wishes to see me?"

"Yes, O Leader!"

"Show him in at once!"

While Gramm hastened out, Murkambu arose, and, with his hands folded behind his back, began slowly pacing along the aisle between two monster machines whose wide-open shark-like jaws had been painted a bloody red.

IT was little more than a minute, however, before Gramm returned, in company with a rail-thin six-footer, whose eyes blinked curiously from behind their tortoise-rimmed spectacles. His clothes—which were of a style never seen in Le-Mur before his arrival—were ragged and torn; his face was bristly with a several days' growth of beard.

"O Leader, I throw myself before you!" he said, using the local formula of respect, but speaking with a foreign accent that brought a dim smile to Murkambu's face.

"Be seated!" invited the latter, pointing to a mat on the floor, where the newcomer squatted cross-legged, while Murkambu returned to his cushioned chair, where he sat perched like an emperor.

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"What is it that brings you here to see me, Manu?"

"O Leader, I was kept in confinement by my enemy, the Timur. Yesterday the prison door was left ajar by accident, and I slipped away. I stole through deep labyrinths for many miles, crawling through holes like a rat, lest I be re-captured. At last I came up near your palace, and having heard of you as a great and noble captain—"

"Who told you that?" inquired Murkambu, abruptly.

"I knew you must be, O Leader, since every one mentioned you as the enemy of my enemy, the Timur, against whom I have vowed vengeance for the sufferings he has caused me."

As he spoke, Will kept his eyes downcast toward the granite floor, seemingly in token of respect. He was remembering how he had rehearsed this very speech; how he had prepared it with the Timur himself; how he had purposely torn his clothes and bestrewn them with dirt and dust; how, with the Timur's aid, he had crept into an underground corridor leading toward Murkambu's palace; and how, emerging from this tunnel, he had inevitably been found by Murkambu's men, who had thus made the present interview possible.

"What is your object in seeing me, Manu?"

Cool, crisp, skeptical, the tones of Murkambu were not those of a man easily duped.

"Whom else should I see, O Leader? Who else could help me so well to avenge myself? I come to offer you my services. My life is at your disposal—and if anything I can do can help by so much as a hair's breadth to put down that tyrant—that devil—that—"

Awkwardly Will paused; for, with his limited Le-Murian vocabulary, he had run out of epithets by which to characterize the Timur.

But he beat his fist angrily in air, and bit his lip to emphasize his fury; and Murkambu, peering at him keenly, uttered a satisfied grunt, and declared:

"Good! I believe you, Manu! Why

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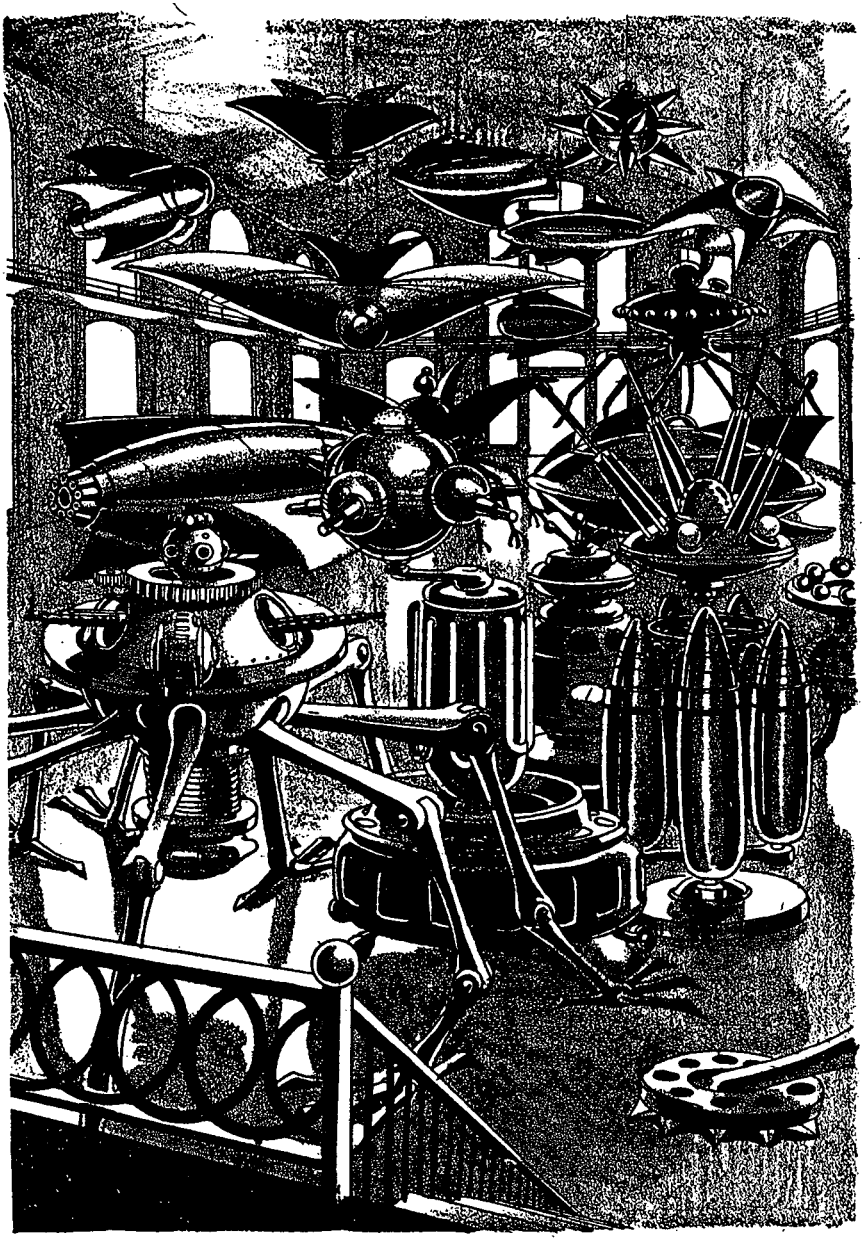

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should you feel anything but rage at the Timur, after the reception he gave you? He is your enemy because he fears that you, with your knowledge of Upper Air inventions, might hurt the cause of Anti-Science. But we of the Science Party will know how to value you! We will welcome any secrets you may tell us of Upper Air inventions!"

"O Leader, I know little about inventions. But I will help as much as I can!"

"Then it is a promise, Manu!"

MURKAMBU spoke with an ominous rumbling. His hawk eyes were two black threatening fires that caused Will to shudder in spite of himself.

"Remember, then, it is a promise—and no man can break a promise to Murkambu and expect to live!"

"It is a promise, O Leader!"

"Then lift your left hand, Manu, and repeat these words after me. They are the oath of allegiance to the Science Party."

Will duly lifted his left hand, and mumbled several syllables after Murkambu; whereupon the leader, turning to Gramm, instructed:

"See that he is given suitable quarters, and dressed in the official Science uniform. After that, let him report to me for further instructions."

"It shall be as you say, O Leader," promised Gramm, saluting.

Will, as he turned to leave, could not see the sharp inquiring glance with which Murkambu's eyes followed him.

It is probable, in fact, that he would not have seen a mountain had it risen from the solid earth at that moment. For the oblong door ahead of him had opened, and a vision that caused his heart to flutter crazily had come gliding in.

For the first startled instant, he did not know if it were merely a ghost—merely the deluding creature of his own dreams. But it was more beautiful than any dream—here, in warm flesh and blood, was that superb creature who had brought him to Le-Mur!

No! there could be no doubt that it was *she*, with the big lustrous violet eyes beneath the pale auburn-crowned brow, the smile of beaming innocence, the fragrance and radiance that only the Chosen One can shed upon any man!

Will stopped short in his tracks at the sight; while she, casting him a glance of smiling curiosity and wonder, passed lightly on her way.

But he did not fail to notice what a deep obeisance Gramm made to her.

"Who may she be," he asked, as soon as he could regain control of himself, "a lady of high rank?"

"Of the very highest, Manu! May the gods bless her and preserve her! She is the youngest and favorite daughter of our leader, Murkambu."

At this information, Will staggered a little, and felt as if a bolt had hit him.

"Her name is Ilwanna," went on Gramm, who was evidently full of the subject. "Ilwanna, the Enchantress. She is known throughout Le-Mur as one of the fairest and wisest of our daughters. Although she is still very young, it is said that never have the fates given any woman a quicker, cleverer mind. In truth, Manu, she is so skilled in science that she has already made several extraordinary inventions."

"Is that—is that why they call her the Enchantress?"

"Yes, Manu, for that reason—and also because of her great beauty. Artists without number have thrown themselves down at her feet, begging to paint her—"

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"And is she," demanded Will, rushing on to the question that concerned him most of all, "is she, by any chance —married?"

"She might be so many times over, Manu, if she accepted all the offers that are made her."

"But she has refused them all?"

"Thus far, Manu. Governors of provinces, statesmen and princes have thrown themselves down before her, but she has rejected all alike. She is wedded, she says, to Science."

Will groaned. If she had frowned on celebrities of her own race, what chance had he? What chance had he in any case, since she was the child of the very man he had been sent to spy upon?

Already he foresaw the dreadful dilemma that was to confront him: of loyalty to the Timur, to whom he had given his pledge, and who represented justice and right; or loyalty to the love that had brought him to Le-Mur. But how could it be that a girl so radiant, so unspoiled and apparently so innocent as Ilwanna could spring from so black a source as Murkambu?

THESE were the thoughts that occupied Will's mind during the next half hour, when Gramm led him into a long underground storage room and fitted him with the official Science uniform: an affair of black and white stripes, with a close-fitting sleeveless jacket and a sort of kilted skirt that ran only to the knees. The material, of a cobweb lightness and softness, was of the same synthetic substance as all the Le-Murian garments, combining the elasticity of rubber with the downiness of floss.

"Now we'll take you back before the Leader, Manu," said Gramm, surveying the results approvingly. "You're coming to look at last like a man!"

Murkambu echoed the same view a few minutes later, when he gazed at the striped figure who was ushered back before his desk. "It's strange what a difference clothes make in a man," he meditated. "Why, one would almost think you had been bred among civilized people, instead of in that barbarous Upper Air!"

And then, with a swift change of manner:

"Now to business, Manu! I don't mind confessing I've taken quite a fancy to you, and for that reason I'm appointing you one of the Councillors of the Science Party."

"Councillor of the Science Party?" demanded Will with a start. "How so?"

Gazing at those hawk eyes, which peered out from beneath the black untidy hair as if they would have liked to devour him, Will could hardly believe that here was a man who was favoring him out of mere personal sentiment.

"How so, Manu? Well, it is this way. You come from a land that has far surpassed our own in all the arts of savagery. Judging from what our instruments show of your world, we are mere infants when it comes to spreading fear, destruction and death. Our proposed 'terror-blow', which we hope to deliver against the Timur, would benefit greatly by your Upper Air expertness in atrocities. That is my chief reason for appointing you a Councillor, Manu."

"But what will my duties be, O Leader?"

"As a Councillor, you will have to inspect our secret preparations for the Revolution, and to suggest improvements, based on your Upper Air knowledge. Thus you may give us the advantage of brutalities beyond our wildest imagination. Thus, also, you

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may reap revenge upon the Timur! Is it not so, O Manu?"

"It is so, O Leader!"

"Then go with Gramm, and he will lead you into the Annihilation Corridors, and the Fifth Basement, and the other pits where we prepare our attacks against the Timur. Look close and carefully, Manu! Do not hesitate at any suggestions. Remember—nothing is too terrible to try! Our motto is, 'To make our dreams come true, let us sow a crop of nightmares!' So out with your Upper Air bestialities! A man with your background will not disappoint us, Manu!"

"I am sure not, O Leader!"

"Then go! On the second day after tomorrow, I will expect you here to report! Now make haste! Look carefully! Think well! For if you show skill and wisdom, you may rise high in the Science Party!"

With an abrupt gesture, Murkambu waved Will and his attendant away. But the newly appointed Councillor, as he started off down the aisle amid the weird intricacy of machines, was torn between conflicting feelings. Here, in his official role with the Science Party, was an ideal opportunity to gain all the desired information for the Timur. But here also was the chance—if he were treacherous enough—to work his way up in the good graces of the Party, to earn the gratitude of Murkambu, and perhaps in the end, if all went well, even to win his way with Murkambu's daughter.

Muttering an oath, Will fought down this temptation. And, at the same time, he reached the end of the aisle; and, glancing back, received a faint shock. For was it true, or did he only imagine that the hawk eyes of Murkambu were following him with a gleam of amusement, and that the Leader chuckled beneath his breath?

CHAPTER V

Murkambu Weaves

WILL stood in a low-roofed basement which, smelling like a chemical laboratory, reached for hundreds of yards, its concrete roof supported by multitudes of steel columns. Along the floor, which was paved with granite, thousands of men were creeping on their hands and knees, or lay full-length, wriggling like snakes. Back and forth they twisted and squirmed in coordinated maneuvers, their lines looking like enormous pythons; while, as if to complete the reptilian impression, they gave out a low hissing sound as they moved, accompanied by a rustling as of lithe legless bodies gliding along the earth.

"This is our Rattlesnake Battalion, our Crawl Troopers," rang out the voice of Sub-Councillor Wincu of the Science Party, as he proudly took the new member on a tour of inspection. "It is our theory that, by creeping and sliding underfoot, these will take the enemy by surprise. They will move best in the darkness, protected by an Anti-Ray machine which will neutralize the Man Detector."

Shuddering, Will watched the maneuvers of these creeping squadrons; and recalled how, for days already, he had done nothing but observe Murkambu's preparations for the Revolution. Certainly, the arrangements were thorough! How would the Timur be able to defend himself? What defense would he have, for example, against the so-called Budding Bomb, which broke up into half a dozen scattering parts, each of which in turn scattered into six or eight more parts, before forty or fifty distinct explosions occurred? Or how would he be able to cope with the Electrolizing Ray, the heat of which caused the instant dis-

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sociation of water into hydrogen and oxygen—a reaction which was reversed an instant later, when the two gases, with a devastating explosion, reunited to form water vapor? Again, how fight against the Hysterical Spray, which broke down the nervous systems of the victims, and caused them to go off into wild hysterical outbursts, from which the only release was in death?

"Diabolical! Simply diabolical! Guess the devil himself couldn't do much worse! Murkambu doesn't need any help from the Upper Air!" Will told himself, as he observed the various war machines. Was it not his duty to inform the Timur of these new weapons? Yes! Clearly, he must slip away to the ruler's palace at the first opportunity!

But this was more easily decided upon than accomplished. It seemed merely accidental, for he was apparently allowed every liberty; but whenever he started toward one of the exits leading into the Timur, a guard with a spear would be blocking the way; or else the entrance would be sealed, or surrounded with impassable pits. During the night (the eight-hour period when the lights were off) Will often thought of stealing away; but always the door of his little underground sleeping chamber would be locked—to guard him "against intrusion," he was told. However, he reassured himself with the thought, "I'll get away when the proper time comes," and, in growing horror, went on with his inspection of Murkambu's war machine.

SEVERAL times, during those days, he had caught sight of a figure that made him almost forget his duty to the Timur. Several times he had seen Murkambu's daughter, graciously smiling as ever, as she entered her father's home—a light, tripping, ethereal being, who seemed so wholly in keeping with this world of tinted, vari-colored palaces, so out of tune with the black designs brewing beneath the surface of those very palaces!

Was there not some way for him to speak with this delightful person, to make her acquaintance? At first he doubted it, for she would go drifting past as if he did not exist; and even when she glanced in his direction, her smile would seem to go right through him. Probably he was a mere cipher in her eyes, he reflected bitterly; he was in the position of a serf who courts the favor of a duchess!

But somehow—though the result might be his humiliation, or his lodgement in a dungeon — he must break down the barrier. He pondered long as to ways and means; but, the more he thought, the more entangled he became in schemes and counter-schemes. And then one day—quite by chance, as it seemed—the problem solved itself.

He had just left Murkambu's palace, after a brief interview with the Leader; and was strolling down a winding walk among pale green and blue fountains. As he turned the curve made by a clump of pansies as tall as a man and with blossoms as large as saucers, he heard light footsteps approaching; and his heart began to beat with a crazy pitter-patter as he came face to face with the very person he hoped and yet dreaded to meet.

He noticed that she smiled as she saw him, with a rippling, ingratiating smile that overspread her entire face; and was about to pass on when Will, feeling her to be not at all unfriendly, made a desperate effort to seize the opportunity.

"Ledala," he said (using a native expression of respect, corresponding to our "Madam"), "Ledala, one moment, please!"

She came to a halt, her violet eyes

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widening with surprise.

"What is it, Runtub?" she asked this word being equivalent to our "Sir."

Will, confronted with this direct question, experienced the most embarrassing moment of his life. Imagine his position! he had stopped this lady, yet had nothing to say to her! He had merely the overwhelming sense that here was the object of his hopes, his thoughts, his dreams! Here was the one whom he had come so far and experienced such perils to meet! And now that he had met her at last, his mind refused to work; not an idea came to his brain, nor a sound to his lips, other than a half articulate muttering!

A SECOND or two that seemed endless went by. Will's stunned mind began to recover, and words were forming on his tongue, when he saw the amused smile that broke out on her face, heard her faint tittering, and knew that, in another moment, she would burst into outright laughter.

Then, indeed, he could have wished to sink into the earth! Then, indeed, he could have desired to be a thousand miles from Le-Mur! Yet, the next instant, with a resolute effort, he regained control of himself; overcame his bewilderment; and, though still embarrassed, spoke out of a stern inner necessity—out of the knowledge that, if he lost this opportunity, another would not speedily come.

"Ledala," he said, "you must pardon me. I come, as you know, from the Upper Air, and speak your language but poorly. And so it is sometimes hard to put my thoughts on my lips."

"That does not tell me why you wished to speak with me, Runtub," she returned, casting him an arch sidelong glance out of those flashing violet eyes.

Her tones, he thought, were as soft as music; each phrase had a rhythm that was like song in his ears.

"No, it does not tell you why I wished to speak with you, Ledala."

And then, as he asked himself what excuse to make, it came to him that no excuse was possible except the truth.

"Why should any one wish to speak with you, Ledala? Why, except that it brings pleasure? I should like to know you, Ledala—and if I am too bold, do not blame me too much. Say merely that it is because I am a barbarian from the Upper Air."

Her clear, silver-toned laughter showed that she was not at all offended, merely surprised—and more amused than ever.

"No, Runtub, I do not think you a barbarian, I have often wondered if the Upper Air could be more barbarous than Le-Mur. And I have wondered what it would be like to speak to an Upper Air man. So I am not sorry you have spoken. I have often seen you passing through my father's halls, and wanted to ask you a question, Runtub. What are those handsome bits of jewelry you wear over your eyes?"

"Bits of jewelry—over my eyes?" gasped Will, wondering if Ilwanna was trying to make fun of him. And reaching impulsively toward his forehead, he felt his horn-rimmed spectacles.

"What are they, Runtub? Nobody here has anything like them. They are such lovely decorations. I think they make a man look *so* attractive!"

AS Will observed the girl's approving smile, he felt grateful to nature for having made him near-sighted.

"Tell me, Runtub, something about your country," Ilwanna went on. "I have always wanted to know how it would feel to live in the Upper Air, with all those terrible open spaces above you—so huge that a person must feel lost! And that big light in the sky, which

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you call the sun, and the little lights called stars—tell me all about them, Runtub!"

Will pointed down a little curving walk toward a patch of lawn between clouds of pink oleander flowers.

"Let us go there," he suggested, his heart beating fast at the unhoped-for opportunity. "Then I will tell you all—all you wish to know."

They squatted cross-legged on the grass, according to the local custom; and Will, seeing that flawless youthful face upturned in a glance of beaming inquiry, hardly knew how to begin. But somehow the words struggled to his lips, and he went on and on, and told of the earth above, its ships and its factories, its great cities and wide countrysides, its hills and rivers and mountains; and she listened fascinated, breaking in every now and then with:

"Oh, that must be glorious, Runtub!" or, "How I should like to see that with my own eyes!"

"Perhaps you will yet see that with your own eyes!" suggested Will; and already wild, impossible plans were forming in his mind. Now that he was face to face with her, and saw how the violet eyes sparkled with an ever-varying light beneath their long flickering lashes, he felt more hopelessly in love than ever, more completely her captive, more utterly chained to whatever part of the earth she might inhabit. Never, never, he thought, could he go back to his own land without her!

He did not know how long he remained with her; it seemed only a few minutes, but may actually have been an hour or two. With rare speed, their acquaintance ripened; having heard much about the Upper Air, she began to tell him many things he did not know about Le-Mur, as well as some things about herself, and how, having taken to science from her early teens, she had had the advantage of her father's laboratory, and had made experiments in chemistry at an age when most girls had no thought except for the cut of their dresses and the arrangement of their hair.

She was enchanted to learn that he too was a scientist, an inventor.

"Most of the men I meet in my father's home are old statesmen," she said. "And I hate statesmen, Runtub. They are like spiders—always weaving webs."

"Do not call me, Runtub," he urged. "My name is Will."

"Will? Will?" she repeated, smiling at the odd sound. "It has a pleasant ring on the tongue."

"And I will call you Ilwanna," he dared to suggest—when he saw her leap up with a start, her eyes widening in surprise, wonder, and alarm.

"What is it?" he demanded, as he too sprang to his feet. And then, turning, he saw.

FACING them with a smile that was almost Mephistophelian in its suavity, stood the girl's father, his hawk eyes flashing more keenly than ever, and his hooked nose seeming preternaturally long as it bent toward them like a beak. How many minutes he had been standing there, overhearing their talk, neither of them could say; but furious blushes came to the cheeks of them both, and they gaped and were wordless beneath his ironical scrutiny.

"Do not let me disturb you, my children," he said, in tones that were low, and surprisingly mild considering the outburst they had expected. "I hope you have been enjoying yourselves."

"I just came upon her by accident, O Leader," Will attempted to explain, still expecting a reprimand. "I was—asking her some questions—"

"It is well, Manu. You are a man,

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are you not—and what man could resist my daughter's loveliness? As a matter of fact, I was about to introduce you, as I wish you to teach Ilwanna some of the Upper Air secrets. You will do that for me, will you not, Manu?"

"If you command it, O Leader, how can I refuse?"

"I do command it. Bless you, my children! Make good use of your time!"

Was it that there was just a faint note of sarcasm in his voice? Was it that there was something slightly sardonic in the twist he gave his black moustache, and in the wrinkling of his heavy cynical lips as he nodded, turned, and passed out of sight behind the clouds of oleander blossoms?

Such were the questions that Will and the girl silently asked as they faced one another again. A shadow had fallen between them; and though they tried to resume their conversation where they had left off, they could not regain their former cheerfulness.

CHAPTER VI

The Net Closes in

"I NEVER saw anything like it," said Gramm to his wife Ulu. "No, may I be dropped into the deepest pit and buried alive if I ever saw anything like the way this young Manu runs after Her Loftiness the Lady Ilwanna. By my head! If they are not always together!"

"Let the cavern roof drop upon me, if that is not disgraceful!" returned Ulu, with a sigh. "What is coming over our Leader? Of old, you know, the man who looked at Ilwanna out of the corner of one eye was as likely as not to end in the Obliteration Rooms!"

"True enough, wife! Yet did the Leader not give a reception for the Manu but a few days ago, and did the young upstart not openly, shamelessly pass most of his time with the Lady Ilwanna? Did I not come across the two of them but a day or two later, huddled side by side beneath a bamboo clump, whispering as though there was no one but the two of them in the whole world? Did I not see them this very morning, behind one of the columns beyond Murkambu's palace? And what were they doing? Looking into each other's eyes as if charmed, and holding hands? Did you ever hear of anything so shameful?"

"By the hem of our Leader's robe!" mourned Ulu. "What is the world coming to?"

This conversation only echoed what was coming to be common gossip. For, although it was only a few weeks since the Upper Air man and Ilwanna had met, they were seen everywhere together—which was a source of great surprise, since Murkambu was known to have been very particular about the company his daughter kept, and to have restricted her men friends to princes and high-ranking politicians. Could it be, people wondered, that he would permit the beauty who had refused so many titled hands to succumb to a mere nobody, a foreigner?

Will himself, amid the delirium of his love, scarcely asked such questions. It was enough for him that he could see Ilwanna almost as often as he pleased; enough for him that she seemed to reciprocate his affection! Surely, as they say, love is blind! Otherwise, he would have known that a naked sword was dangling above his head, would have realized that he was only being played with, as a cat plays with a mouse.

All too soon the bubble was to burst! And the blow, when it fell, was to descend with unexpected savagery.

He had not, it is true, forgotten his

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pledge to the Timur; nor forgotten the threatened Revolution, which might wreck the life of Le-Mur. But as day after day went by, and no Revolution broke out, he was lulled into a false sense of security; and began to feel that perhaps after all, despite all Murkambu's preparations, there would be no actual outbreak.

"Another case," he thought, "of the barking dog that does not bite!" In the end, the Timur might not need his aid —and there might be no conflict between his duty to the ruler and his love for Murkambu's daughter!

Then rudely, in one moment, came the awakening. He had just come from a meeting with Ilwanna—a meeting in which, for the first time, he had taken her into his arms, had urged his love upon her, felt the responsive pressure of her arms, and heard her murmured promises of devotion. A man in the state in which he found himself after that meeting can hardly be said to be normal; his head whirled, his thoughts floated on clouds, he scarcely knew that there was a solid earth beneath his feet. And then, breaking into his ecstasy like a bombshell, came cruel realization.

He had received a summons, as many times before, from Sub-Councillor Wincu:

"See me at once!"

Making his way into the cavern-like room that was Wincu's headquarters, he was handed a slip of paper on which a few words were written in the up-and-down style of Le-Mur.

"Read and destroy," murmured Wincu.

He read:

"You are instructed to report at lightfall on the day after tomorrow at the tenth column to the right of these headquarters for R-day activities."

"R-day," as Will understood only too clearly, meant "day of the Revolution." The decisive blow against the Timur was less than forty-eight hours away!

IN a room of opalescent glass, whose shimmering pearly walls curved about them like an enormous bell, Murkambu sat face to face with his daughter. His expression was determined, bitter, angry, with just a suggestion of savagery in the way in which he bit into his lower lip; while the girl's cheeks were flushed, her lovely small lips drooped sullenly, and she shrank back on her cushion on the onyx floor, her violet eyes wide open with fear.

"What is that?" her father shot out at her, pushing his square jaw forward with a bulldog thrust. "You dare to defy me?"

"It is not that I defy you," she pleaded, withdrawing from him as far as possible. "It is only that—that I will not act like a traitor!"

"Traitor?" he echoed, giving the word an ironic ring. "Is it nothing, then, to play the traitor to *me?* Listen, my girl! Why do you suppose I have been throwing you in the way of this crawling rat from the Upper Air? Why do you suppose I have been making it easy for you to meet?—keeping you around the palace after he arrived, and using a thousand wiles so that you two might see one another? Was it that I wanted my daughter thrown away on such foreign trash? You know me better than that, Ilwanna! You knew very well I had my own ends to fulfill!"

"I knew nothing of the kind!" she flashed back, with spirit.

"From the beginning," went on Murkambu, his voice grown suave, in the manner of one who hides a dagger beneath every word, "did not my secret agents tell me all about him? Did I not know he was a spy?—a spy sent here by the Timur to ferret out my secrets? Was I deceived for one moment by the

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perfidy in his heart?"

"I do not believe it!" denied Ilwanna, her tiny clenched fists indignantly shaking. "Will—that is, the Manu—is not perfidious!"

"No? Well, that is a matter for me to judge!" roared the Leader. "Do you think I could not have crushed him at any moment like a fly between my two hands? But why did I not do so? Not because I would have had any more compunction than about stepping on any other worm! No! Because it is bad policy to kill a man when he has valuable information that one may drag out of him!"

THE girl's breath came short and fast beneath the pressure of her terror; but she remained silent, staring at her persecutor.

"Being in the Timur's employ, has he not some of the secrets of his master? The secrets of defense—which my spies have not been able to fathom, because of the Man Detector? Then how can I find out what he knows? Not by direct questioning! Possibly not even by torture! But there is a simpler, softer way. And that is where you come in, Ilwanna. The charm and seductiveness of a woman—will they not extract that which scourges and dungeons are powerless to drag from a man?"

With an exclamation of anger, Ilwanna was on her feet. Her shapely head tossed proudly; her eyes were ablaze as she confronted her parent.

"Oh! So you wish me to act as a decoy to lure him for your ends?"

Murkambu too had arisen. But his manner was controlled, and his tones were quiet as he replied, with just the slightest suggestion of irony:

"Well, my lady, that is one way of putting it. In any case, he is now ripe for probing. I can see it in those silly glances he casts at you—ha, ha, as if you were the only thing in female shape that ever walked this earth! He got to the stage of imbecility even sooner than I expected. So now, Ilwanna, with just a little cleverness, you can learn what I want you to, and then bring me the information. It is little enough for your father to ask of you."

"I—I do not enjoy being used as a tool!" retorted Ilwanna. She was recalling how, from her earliest days, Murkambu had tried to make use of her for his own purposes: how he had employed her as a bait for his political rivals, whom he had permitted to court her, while drawing advantageous agreements out of them; how he had secretly betrothed her, in the face of her tearful protests, to the doddering old Baron Grimlok, before the would-be bridegroom had, fortunately for her, been removed by a stroke of apoplexy. She remembered how she had never, from childhood, had a word of fatherly affection from this redoubtable parent of hers, and how she had always feared him, and felt that he regarded her as but one of his many possessions.

And so her breast swelled indignantly, and a feeling that was near to hatred mingled with her dread as she stood there confronting him beneath the pearly walls of that bell-shaped room. But chiefly it was not for herself that she was angry and afraid.

"And what—what will you do with *him?*" she demanded.

"With him? What does one always do with spies? Do you think I would let him live in any case, after the advances he has made to my daughter?"

She compressed her lower lip, and made a resolute effort to keep back the tears.

"Why, it's—it's ungodly!" she at length forced out, with something like a sob.

"Not at all, my girl. Merely good

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politics. Now will you go to him, like a loyal daughter of mine, and get me that information? If you refuse, well—you will not enjoy my locking you in the Black Tower for a month, as it has been my unfortunate duty to do once or twice before. Also, if you refuse—there will be no use prolonging the life of this earthworm from above. I will have him sent this very day to the Obliteration Rooms!"

"Oh, not this day!" she pleaded, almost in a wail. "Please give us time!"

"Then will you go to him, and get me that information? He is now in the sub-storage department, beneath the Violet Pavilion. If you will go out this way, my lady—"

With the greatest urbanity, Murkambu had reached toward the knob of a little oblong door.

"Just out this way. That's it. I knew you were a good daughter after all. You'll find it much more pleasant, really, than going to the Black Tower. Well, take your time. I'll give you till evening, when you'll find me in my study in the Hall of Science. But don't forget—I'll expect some really *valuable* information!"

Choking down a sob, Ilwanna turned and hastily went out.

WILL meanwhile was wrinkling up his brows and chewing at his lips as he restlessly paced the floor in the sub-storage department beneath the Violet Pavilion. Rarely had any man had to do battle with a more heartrending problem. Since R-day was at hand, it was clearly his duty to rush off and inform the Timur, so that he might take immediate steps to defend himself. Upon this might depend the well-being, the future of all Le-Mur! Yet to fulfill his pledge to the Timur would be to prove unfaithful to his love for Ilwanna.

How would she be able to forgive him for dashing off without a word to her? How forgive his treachery to her father? What explanation could he possibly offer that would make him appear anything better than a contemptible spy and traitor?

Compared to the warm reality of Ilwanna, how pale and unimportant the Timur and his cause now seemed! Yet never in his inmost heart did Will have any doubt of his course. He saw before him the Timur's patriarchal face, white-bearded and lined with trouble; contrasted it with the shrewd, cynical face of Murkambu; and knew in what direction his duty lay. Before his mind flashed the lines of a poet of centuries before, "I could not love thee, Dear, so much loved I not honor more"; and he knew that he too must follow the call of honor.

With a sigh, he started up the stairway into the Violet Pavilion. His senses were alert as a hunted beast's; while, trying to fight down the heaviness that weighed upon him like lead, he skirted a sentry-guarded door; veered aside from two spear-wielding guards who passed him with cold, suspicious glances; glided, without being seen, toward a trapdoor that he knew, and found it locked; and was about to hasten out of the Violet Pavilion when, startlingly, he came face to face with a familiar figure.

But her breathless manner, her pale countenance, her contorted cheeks and hurried gestures told him that here was a creature very different from the serene self-assured Ilwanna he had seen only a few hours before.

She did not take time for a formal greeting.

"Oh, thank the gods, it's you!" she exclaimed. And then, motioning him around a corner into a corridor of blue-veined marble where they could be by

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themselves, she whispered:

"Hurry! Fly! There's not one moment to spare!"

He stared at her bewildered, in mute inquiry, while she went on, still in a whisper, but with the most eager urgency:

"Fly, I say! They'll be after us! We've not one second to waste!"

Glancing down into those big shining eyes that brimmed with tears, Will demanded:

"*We? We've* not one second to waste?"

"Yes, *we,*" she murmured; and her lips trembled, and he read the unutterable devotion in her gaze. "Make haste, make haste, my love. Whether we live or die, henceforth we will go together."

CHAPTER VII

Blow Follows Blow

THROUGH long underground passageways the lovers hurried, side by side. They descended and ascended stairways; slid down deep chutes; twisted through corkscrew tunnels; and crept into doorways so narrow that Will could barely force himself through.

"All Le-Mur is a labyrinth like this, beneath the main caverns," Ilwanna explained. "Fortunately, I know my way about."

By hasty snatches, she explained to him the nature of his peril; explained, also, her sudden decision to flee with him.

"I have often thought of flying from my father," she said. "Here in Le-Mur we women are supposed to have equal rights; but actually I was his puppet, which he pulled upon a string. Therefore I am doubly glad to go with you—to the Upper Air—anywhere, my beloved—"

"But first I must go to the Timur," Will confessed, gloomily. "How will you come with me, to your father's mortal enemy—"

"He is not *my* mortal enemy, is he? Besides, he need not know I am my father's daughter! I can disguise myself, can I not? Where do you think I am leading you now but to the home of my faithful old servant Sarpogu, who will take care of the change?"

A few minutes later, on the fifth level underground, they had entered a dingy ill-lighted den, where a wrinkled witch-like old woman threw her arms about Ilwanna.

"Bless you, little daughter!" she exclaimed. "Where do you come from? What are you all in such a flutter about? Why, I have known you since you were no bigger than my forearm, yet never did I see you so excited before!"

"Sarpogu was my nurse for years, after my poor mother died," Ilwanna announced. And then, turning to the old woman, she whispered something into her ear; after which the two of them retired together, and were gone about a quarter of an hour.

When they returned, Will started forward with a gasp. Ilwanna's shimmering cobweb robe had given place to the drab muddy yellow costume of the servant class. Her auburn hair had been dusted over with gray, until it seemed to belong to an old woman. Her pale, flawless cheeks had been stained with a dye which, even on close approach, gave the impression of the ruts and wrinkles of age. She stooped slightly as she walked; and her wide-open mouth showed several blackened, decayed-looking teeth which, only a few minutes before, had been faultlessly white.

Had it not been for the twinkling violet eyes, Will would scarcely have

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known that this was Ilwanna at all!

"Good for you!" he greeted her. "You are a splendid little actress!"

"We will need all the acting we can do," she replied. And, turning, she thanked Sarpogu; received a small packet of condensed food from her hands; and urged, "Come, Will, let's be going."

EVERY minute, they knew, was precious. Perhaps by this time his absence, if not Ilwanna's, had been noticed; perhaps pursuers were already on their trail.

"Not until we are near the Timur's palace will we be safe," she whispered to him. "But come! I know every secret passageway!"

Crawling through a dimly lighted gallery that twisted like a serpent, she led him toward a large triangular gateway.

"Once we have passed this," she said, "we will be under the protection of the Timur's soldiers." But, as they drew near, there came an ominous clanking; long spear-pointed bars drew down—and the path was blocked as solidly as by a row of bayonets.

Retreating, they tried another gallery; and this time, instead of the bristling bars, a heavy chain blocked their passage. On a third occasion, a barbed wire meshwork suddenly faced them; and, on the fourth attempt, a shower of arrows shot up from the earth, one of them almost impaling Will.

It was now only too clear that every path would be blocked. The floor of every gallery was planted with one of the so-called "electric mines" which automatically, at the lightest footfall, set up an impassable barrier.

Even as this realization came to them, Ilwanna drew from the inner folds of her garments a little black device no larger than a marble, which she thrust into one of her ears. Then, bending down to the gallery floor, she listened for several minutes.

Resuming an upright posture, she looked solemn, and more frightened than Will had yet seen her. Her disguise could not conceal the trembling of her hands, nor wholly hide the unusual pallor that had overspread her face. Nor could it keep her voice from faltering as she announced:

"It is as I feared. I hear the tramp of marching columns."

"But how? How can you hear them?"

"Listen yourself, beloved!"

She gave him the black marble-sized object; and, putting it in one of his ears, he bent down as she had done.

Surely enough, a low, muffled tramp, tramp, tramp came to his ears!

"It is the Magnetic Sound Amplifier, which I myself invented," she declared. "It attracts the waves of sound vibrating through the earth, and magnifies them more than a million times."

But Will was not interested just then in scientific explanations.

"What is the meaning," he gasped, "of the marching columns?"

She cast him a glance which made the answer only too evident.

"Our escape has been noticed," was all she said.

But how avoid the approaching enemy? Obviously, no ordinary hideout would help them; for the Man Detector, with its remorseless rays, would uncover them more surely than would a pack of bloodhounds.

"There is just one last hope," Ilwanna decided, slowly and reflectively. "On the eleventh layer underground—the lowest level—there is an old gallery which has not been used for years, having been condemned as unsafe. It may be that this has been overlooked,

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and is still barely passable. If you are willing to take the chance—"

"For myself—of course I am willing. But why must you run the risk?"

"Where you go, I go! Come, while we stand here debating, we may both be caught!"

AS if to testify to the truth of this assertion, the gallery roof trembled slightly.

"The troops—the troops march just above!" whispered Ilwanna; and, not daring to utter another word, she led the way downward.

They groped through a tunnel so steep that they had great difficulty in keeping their balance; and, after long loopings and windings, came to a circle of darkness resembling the entrance to a coal cellar.

"Surely enough, it *has* been forgotten!" exclaimed the girl, exultantly. "There is not one light burning!"

In Will's eyes, the pitch-black entrance looked far from inviting. But he gritted his teeth; choked down his misgivings; murmured, "Good, let's go on!"; and took out one of the flashlights that he had brought from the Upper Air (the other having been left at his headquarters at the Timur's, for use in emergencies).

Leading the way, he pushed forward foot by foot. The tunnel was so narrow that two persons could not move side by side; it twisted as sinuously as a coiled wire; it was filled with noisome odors, as of a long-closed basement; and was hot as a desert day, since the refrigeration system did not apply here.

Puffing, panting and sweating, Will had a sense of imprisonment, which only grew as he pressed on; a sense of impending catastrophe, which he could not shake off. Several times, turning to Ilwanna, he begged her to go back, in order to spare herself the torment and peril; but always her laughter rang out, clear and reassuring.

"And where is there that you can go, beloved, and I cannot follow?"

At last they came to a point so narrow that they doubted the possibility of further penetration.

"Better let me go ahead just a little to explore," suggested Will, and forced his way forward a few yards. It was strange that his premonition of disaster, so active until now, was slumbering at this very moment when it should have been most awake!

"Wait, I'm coming too!" he heard Ilwanna crying. But almost before her weirdly echoing tones had died down, they were drowned by another sound, a sudden thundering and crashing, accompanied by such a shaking of the earth that Will was thrown off his feet. For several seconds the commotion continued, then subsided to a crunching and grating that rapidly faded out. But what was that scream which Will had heard or thought he had heard at the height of the tumult?

More startled and bewildered than hurt, he picked himself up; observed with a shock that everything about him had gone black; and, reaching automatically for his flashlight, found that the lens and light-bulb had been shattered as he fell.

"Ilwanna!" he cried, in terror for her sake. "Ilwanna! Ilwanna!"

AS from an enormous distance, her voice came to him:

"Here I am, beloved! I am not hurt! But you—are you safe?"

"I am safe!" he shouted back. "Wait there for me! I am coming!"

Even as he started toward her, a sharp obstacle imposed itself in his way. His hands, groping in the darkness, felt a hard, irregular shape, as of

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a boulder. And above this shape he felt others, of huge size, the whole forming a massive barricade.

"Be careful, beloved, lest you displace other rocks!" he heard Ilwanna's voice coming to him in a wail. "They have had rock slides before—that is why they called this gallery unsafe. The pressure of your weight as you passed—it was enough to make the roof fall!"

"Thank God, the rocks missed us both!" he exclaimed.

"Thank God, there is an open space between, so that we may talk!"

"But who are we to thank," he groaned, "that we're on opposite sides of this infernal rock-fall? Maybe, if I try, I can clear some of these stones away—"

"No, no, by the Timur's beard, don't!" she warned, in a voice shrill with alarm. "That might start another slide!"

"But how the deuce can we get out now?" he mourned. His head, reeling in that hot, devitalized air, was unable to do battle with the problem. Were they both to perish there in that foul tunnel?

"What does it matter if we die, so long as we die together?" he heard her say, as if in echo of his thoughts.

Then, before he could attempt an answer, he was startled by a sound from the far distance. Thud, thud, thud! with a dull monotonous insistency, gradually growing louder, until it seemed as if he could hear the crashing and pounding of his approaching doom!

"What is it?" he gasped. "What can it be?"

But the answer was already on Ilwanna's lips.

"The troops! I should have known it! The troops have heard the rock-slide! They're coming to investigate!"

Surely enough, vague shadows began to move from far down the gallery. Looking through a crevice between two fallen rocks—a crevice only a few inches across—he could see the wavering reflections. As yet the light-bearers were hidden around a turn in the corridor; but the green rays of their lanterns, flickering dimly through the tunnel walls, were more terrifying than a visible menace.

"Be of good heart, beloved. It is only the troops approaching," Ilwanna consoled him; but the tones of her voice betrayed that she was shuddering.

THUD, thud, thud, the noise grew louder and more ominous. Then suddenly, around a turn in the corridor, a tall figure swept, a dull green radium lantern burning in one hand, the keen steel of a spearpoint glittering above his right shoulder. Behind him, in close succession, others followed, although to Will's eyes they were as a mere troop of shadows, of ghosts.

"Ah," the leader exclaimed, his eyes falling upon Ilwanna, who, in her disguise, he could not recognize. "What dog of a spy have we here? Come, you dirty wretch, out with you!"

With a wrench, the newcomer had jerked Ilwanna forward by the arm. And Will, observing this act and hearing her murmur of protest, felt a savage desire to leap to her aid. Oh, could he only have burst through the rock wall! But was any lover ever in a more cruel position? Powerless to lift a finger to help her, he saw her lashed about with ropes; heard her cry out in shrill indignation; heard the mocking laughter of her captors; and heard one of the men exclaim:

"Away with her! We will bring her to our good master Murkambu, who makes short shrift of spies!"

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"Oh, not to Murkambu!" the victim protested, terrified. "Do not take me to Murkambu!"

Her captors only laughed; while Will, clutching at the rocks in his rage, called out a challenge:

"Hurt one hair of her head, and, devil take you, I'll—"

"Oh, so there's another!" shouted one of the soldiers, aware for the first time of Will's presence. "By the lamp of my eyes! Another spy! Let us take him too!"

With an eager thrust, the man started forward. But, even as he did so, the unexpected once more intervened. There came another roaring in Will's ears, the rumble of walls collapsing, the crash and thunder of falling rocks; and Will, knocked to the earth by the force of the upheaval, was momentarily stunned.

Recovering himself with an effort, he realized that the fissure in the rocks had been sealed. Everything about him was dark and silent as death; and there was no answer when he beat his fists against the rocks, and called out, in choking, sobbing notes:

"Ilwanna! Ilwanna! Answer me, Ilwanna! Answer! Ilwanna, Ilwanna, are you still alive?"

CHAPTER VIII

The Hour Strikes

SLOWLY, blindly, like a man in a bad dream, Will began groping his way down the black tunnel. He had no further hope of any response from Ilwanna; the second rock-slide had evidently done its work all too well!

"God! Why didn't it catch me, too!" Will muttered to himself, in his despondency; but, remembering his duty to the Timur, he knew that he had no choice but to go on and seek to extricate himself.

This task, however, seemed hopeless. He did not know for how many hours he wandered back and forth sagging with the heat, half delirious with thirst, his tongue hanging out like an exhausted dog's, his head aching, his eyes useless in that impenetrable darkness. He knocked his head against jutting walls, stubbed his toes, bruised his shins and elbows; he tripped, and recovered himself; he sat for brief intervals on the rutted floor to rest, then arose and crept or stumbled on his way.

It was not long before he realized that he was lost. The tunnel branched in several places; he chose his course at random, and had to make blind guesses. Several times, when the gallery led sharply downward, he retraced his path; once he slipped down a ten-foot descent, and, torn and scratched, was unable to make his way back. And finally, near to fainting, he flung himself full length on the floor, his breath coming hard, his head swimming, his skin burning hot; while his fevered mind formed visions of how, perhaps for ages, his bones would lie here in this blank depth, unburied, undiscovered, until at last the cavern roof fell in above them.

But again he arose and struggled on, stumbling and creeping, more often on all fours than erect. It seemed that an epoch of torment went by before, long afterward, he was aware of a dim light shining somewhere ahead.

He approached it; it appeared far away, appeared to retreat as he advanced; he felt that he had not the strength to reach it. But gradually the light brightened; and there came a moment when, at a turn in the tunnel, he found himself approaching the entrance of an illuminated gallery, where a cool breath showed that he was returning to the air-conditioned regions.

It was there that, an hour or two

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later, a company of armed scouts found him as they made their regular rounds. He lay unconscious, apparently lifeless, and it was long before they could revive him. Even after his eyes opened and the power of speech came back to him, he looked about him doubtfully and with fear.

"Who are you? Murkambu's men?" he mumbled, wondering if he had endured so much merely in order to fall into the power of his enemy.

But at the mention of Murkambu, the leader of the scouts spat out in disgust.

"No! by our honor! We are loyal troops of His Loftiness the Timur!"

"Thank God!" sighed Will, and sank back into unconsciousness.

MANY hours more had passed before he was in a condition to see the ruler. Then, rested and fed, and with his soiled and gashed clothes replaced by a clean, fresh robe, he was led back to the edifice of many-domed crystal where the Timur held court.

To his surprise, a great change had overcome the whole region. Enormous walls of rock had been thrown up, in some places completely hiding the bubble palaces. Black screens had been erected in front of the mushroom temples; a meshwork of deep trenches threaded the earth; heavy wire entanglements marked "Keep off!" lined the walks among the fountains and flowers. And everywhere were brusque, black-clad men carrying spears and long, gray, steel machines of about the size and shape of a baseball bat.

"What in blazes has come over the place?" Will wondered. But he was not to be long in finding out.

Once again he was led through a little oblong doorway into the crystalline palace; down a long arched corridor that glowed with translucent rose and gold; and into a great vaulted chamber where dozens of men in long flowing robes were squatted cross-legged on the floor.

In the center, also cross-legged, the Timur sat upon his platform of purple velvet. But it seemed to Will that he looked years older; his back, previously erect in spite of his years, now seemed stooped beneath an invisible weight; and his face appeared thinner and more lined.

Upon seeing Will, who reached down and touched the floor three times with his left hand in the prescribed ceremony of respect, the Timur motioned to the assembled company in a gesture of dismissal; and, after they were gone, turned to Will, and inquired, in a sad and weary voice:

"Well, Manu, what have you found?"

As briefly as possible, Will reported what he knew of Murkambu's preparations.

"He plans to strike the great blow immediately!" he ended breathlessly. "Less than forty-eight hours from when I left—and I do not know how much time has passed."

In such excitement did the Timur lean forward that Will thought he was about to fall off his pedestal.

"What's that?" he demanded. "By my robe, Manu! just what did you hear?"

Will mentioned the day and hour, according to the local way of reckoning time. And, at this announcement, the Timur's blue eyes seemed ready to pop out of his head. He gave a still more agitated start, twisted about on his purple platform, and exclaimed, in a long-drawn voice of despair:

"Why, that gives us only one hour more!"

PARALYZED by the blow, the ruler seemed unable to warm himself into action.

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"I knew it would happen!" he muttered into his beard. "I knew it! Haven't I been taking defense measures? Haven't I been building electric barricades, to smite the enemy with the sting of death? And Ray Screens, to ward off the poison Infra-Red light beams? And Boomerang Nets, to catch and hurl back the enemy's projectiles? Haven't I ruined our beautiful land? What will be left of it all when the attack is over?"

"Come, you must rouse yourself—take action, Your Loftiness! At once!"

"Take action, Manu? But how? From what direction will the attack come? Against what should I defend myself? Murkambu will strike in the dark, with secret new weapons. I have not the forces to defend myself—no, in spite of all my preparations! I have not the forces, Manu! Not unless I make use of secret new weapons!"

"What secret new weapons have you, Your Loftiness?"

The Timur thought for a moment, and his face appeared graver than ever.

"Nothing that is not too terrible to use. No, nothing not too terrible to use, Manu. Locked up in my private vaults, there are—"

Interrupting him in mid-sentence, a uniformed man dashed in through the rear door. Dishevelled, panting, red-faced, he entered without formality; pressed forward, half reeling, to the Timur's pedestal; and, without taking time to prostrate himself or salute, burst out, in a broken voice:

"Your Loftiness—Your Loftiness—"

"What is it, Eru?" demanded the ruler, his twitching fingers eloquent of his concern.

"Your Loftiness," rushed on the newcomer, gasping. "Your Loftiness—tidings for you!"

"What tidings?"

"Murkambu's men — his Crawl Troopers—they have stormed us on the Seventh Layer. They have broke—have broken through our first Column of Defense!"

All too clearly Will remembered the troops he had seen crawling and squirming in a great serpentine.

"They have wound their way in snake-like," went on Eru, with a wail. "Crushed our advance guard with a rattlesnake twist! Many of our men are in flight, O Leader! There seems no way to beat the enemy back."

The Timur groaned. In tones so low and rapid that Will could not follow the words, he snapped out a series of orders. Then, coming down from his pedestal and taking up a pronged staff, he started in stately dignity across the room.

"The hour is come," he said, "when we must give our all for LeMur and be ready to die in order that right may live."

CHAPTER IX

The Crawl Troopers Advance

OUT of a thousand tunnels, which appeared at sudden unexpected places in the earth, the black-and-white striped troops of the Science Party were pouring. They shot from the ground in little buzzing machines, which leapt forward like grasshoppers; they crawled down from the roof of the Great Cavern, and swung themselves to the floor on spider-like cables; they squirmed in their serpent columns around the buildings and over the rock-piles; they pointed their weapons, shaped like baseball bats; and let out showers of blue sparks, which immunized the electrical defenses. Barricades crumbled before them like paper; while thousands of citizens fled shouting and screaming, jostling one another as they dived into deep pits for safety; or falling head-

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long with mortal shrieks as they were pierced by the flame-red bolts launched by the invaders.

Meanwhile, in a small closed compartment five layers underground, the Timur sat with a small corps of his advisers. Through a combination radio and television machine, he had been following the invasion; and his eyes were moist as he watched the rapid advance of Murkambu's followers.

"I knew we were not prepared," he mourned, "but I never suspected the enemy could take us so by storm."

"O Timur," said Will, who stood at his side, "what of the secret weapons you said you had?"

The Timur sighed.

"Never did I suppose I would descend to using them. They are savage enough, Manu, to be worthy of the Upper Air!"

"Yet you are going to use them?"

"I myself have this day persuaded him," declared General Massupu, a bulldog-faced figure who stood to the ruler's right. "His Loftiness was very reluctant, but I have convinced him that the end justifies the means."

"I fear that the end will be ruin!" mourned the Timur.

"The end will be victory!" dissented Massupu. "Wait, and see! In only a few minutes now, the new inventions will be in operation. We will witness the results through the Sound-Sight Relayer."

With a confident gesture, the General pointed to a great chest-like case, from which scores of rubber tubes emerged, in masses like a Gorgon's hair. This, Will knew, was the radio-television machine; by adjusting the appropriate tubes to eyes and ears, every person in the room might be a long-range spectator of the battle.

"Yes, the new inventions will save us!" Massupu went on, with smiling assurance. And, indeed, it soon began to look as if he spoke the truth! For Will, by means of the "Sound-Sight Relayer," gazed upon a strangely altered battlefield.

FIRST he observed the bubble palaces, the mushroom temples, with the invading columns winding among them in their thick serpent-like masses. Then suddenly, out of the earth, iron snouts several feet across emerged, looking a little like the heads of gigantic metal drills. And from each of these machines, almost instantly, there uprose a gleaming muzzle, like a huge rapid-fire gun, which shot a long white streak, apparently of solid matter, to the accompaniment of a roaring which, in spite of the dimming effects of the machine, was almost too much for the listener's ears. Each streak struck one of the columns of men, which melted away before it like ants before a hurricane; each, swerving to right and left, obliterated whole battalions.

Deadly tanks that bored up from within the earth!

But they did not stop with the destruction of the men. One bored its way like a series of sixteen-inch shells through the buildings, which collapsed one after one, to the accompaniment of a Titanic crashing and thundering. And in places, where a white streak struck the ground, the solid rock seemed to dissolve before it, while great steamy clouds arose and hid the wreckage.

Then, when by degrees the mists cleared away and the white streaks had vanished, Will could see only the broken steel bones of towers, the glitter of shattered glass, the jumbles of stone and steel where the exquisite courts and temples had stood. All were drenched as by a flood; great pools of water stood all about; and muddy streams flowed in all directions.

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Will did not need to be told what had caused the devastation. It had all been done by the power of water! Hydraulic spouts, under such pressure as to release the liquid with a bullet's speed, were as savage destroyers as solid projectiles. The principle was already familiar in the Upper Air, in hydraulic mining that tore down whole mountainsides—the Le-Murian weapons merely represented an extension of the same idea!

"By my beard," mourned the Timur, as he staggered away from the Sound-Sight Relayer, "at the rate we're tearing things up, we won't be much better off if we win than if we lose!"

"Quite the contrary, Your Loftiness!" enthused General Massupu. "Why, it gives me a sense of artistic satisfaction, the way we wiped the enemy out. But wait! We haven't finished yet! The other inventions are still more wonderful!"

TURNING back to the Sight-Sound Relayer, Will saw something that looked like a gigantic flaming eagle launched into air from a hidden tube. It floated through space, midway to the roof of the Great Cavern, and gave off crimson sparks as it advanced; while following it by adjusting the instrument as it moved toward Murkambu's domains, Will saw how it swooped with orange-red drooping talons upon a great domed building. For an instant it hovered above the roof, as if held back by some conscious reluctance; then fell —and, in a sudden scarlet puff, the building was gone.

"Well, what do you think of our eagle torpedo?" General Massupu demanded. "Ought to cost the enemy a good deal before we're done, don't you think?"

But Will, as he observed the debris of the once-proud edifice, felt a regret that he could not wholly account for, as at the death of something rare and priceless. Was it that the thought of Ilwanna was in his mind? That he knew that she, if alive, would be in just such a place as the eagle torpedo had destroyed? But no! She had been crushed in the rock-slide! It could make no difference to her what bombs were launched or what buildings wrecked!

"The principle of the torpedo is really very simple," he heard Massupu explaining, jubilantly. "Buoyed up in an envelope of hydrogen, it can travel forty or fifty miles through the air with its cargo of deadly explosives. Then, when it strikes, the hydrogen, igniting, will make the explosion all the more destructive. But look at *this* weapon!"

Once more Will's eyes and ears were fastened on the Sight-Sound Relayer, and noted a scene that was spectacular if not beautiful. Through the air, high up toward the roof of the Great Cavern, long colored filaments were moving. Ribbon-like and wavy, they extended in lines of orange and vermilion, indigo and lemon, emerald, sapphire and ruby, which bent and twisted like colossal sky-serpents and rapidly moved westward toward Murkambu's headquarters.

At first they seemed so much like the parts of some harmless and fantastic exhibition that it was hard to believe them the agents of death. But Will, observing them as they came to earth with swift and sinuous windings after traveling for miles, saw how every man and woman within many yards fell as if struck by a bullet, quivered for a moment, and then lay still.

"These are the Sky Serpents," stated General Massupu. "They are composed of poison gasses, which loop and squirm so horribly that once we have launched them they are out of control, and neither we or the enemy can tell where they are to descend."

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"You believe these inventions can win the war?" asked Will.

General Massupu nodded.

"Murkambu will have no chance. Within a few weeks the Science Party will be defeated by science."

THE events of the next several days did, indeed, seem to bear out this prediction. With the introduction of the secret weapons, a sharp turn in the tide of battle was noted. Will, listening and watching beside the Timur and his advisers, heard the jubilation as the invasion was thrown back mile after mile; as Murkambu's crawl-troopers were scattered or chased into the depths of the earth; as all the Science warriors were cleared out of the districts they had overrun; and the Timur's forces prepared to take the offensive in the territory still under rebel control.

"This will be the end of Murkambu!" predicted General Massupu, as he exultantly followed the various engagements through the Sight-Sound Relayer.

Will, convinced of the truth of this forecast, now began to think of returning to the Upper Air. A deep, unceasing melancholy had possessed him ever since the loss of Ilwanna; he knew that he could never find peace without her here in Le-Mur. On the other hand, how could he return to his own land until he knew beyond any question what had happened to her? Even though he had ceased to hope, he must have positive information as to her fate! And for that he must wait until the war was over and he could again enter her father's territory.

But meanwhile strange and disastrous events were to intervene.

One day, upon descending to the Timur's underground retreat, Will found the ruler looking particularly depressed. Little blue hollows had formed beneath his eyes; his long, sagacious face drooped, and his cheeks were criss-crossed with downturning grooves. He hardly acknowledged Will's salute; but, gazing straight ahead with a sad, fixed stare, remarked:

"It is just as I thought, Manu. The new weapons are of no use after all."

"Of no use, O Timur? But have they not driven the enemy back?"

"Yes, for a while, Manu. But there is an old saying of our people: 'The tricks taught to the right hand can be learned by the left.' Look through the Sound-Sight Relayer—and you will see!"

Will did as directed; and saw the black-and-white striped columns of Murkambu advancing in a long serpentine across a plain littered with heaped and broken masonry. Out of great spouts, aiding their advance, poured white devastating streams of molten metal; above them, gigantic torpedoes floated through the air toward the enemy; while flashing streaks of lightning reached out in long banners.

"Good God!" Will exclaimed. "They've improved on our inventions!"

"Exactly!" groaned the Timur. "Which means we're as badly off as ever. They've already taken back most of the land we recaptured from them. What's more, we don't seem able to stop their advance. They also have a wholly new weapon—and it's more terrible than any of ours."

WILL, peering and listening through the instrument, was aware of a prodigious apparition just rising above a little ridge of ground. Shaped like a tiger, with great black and tawny stripes, it seemed larger than an elephant as it came springing forward in a series of stupendous bounds. From its wide-open red mouth, a purple vapor fumed; its claws, slashing at the ground whenever

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they touched it, left gashes many feet wide. Its eyes were yellow blazes so bright that Will could hardly bear to look; and from its throat there issued a bellowing as of an infuriated bull.

Appalled, and not quite sure whether it were an actual beast, Will watched the monster approach. Then all at once, with such force that it caused the very instrument to tremble, the giant flew apart—scattered into hundreds of fragments, each of which burst with loud detonations and showers of crimson sparks. It was several minutes before the upheaval had subsided; and, when all was quiet again, the earth over hundreds of acres was turned up as by a titanic plow.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed the watcher. "That *is* worse than any of our weapons."

"You don't know the most terrible part of it, either," the Timur announced, with a sigh. "The gases released by the explosions have a peculiar effect. Every one who inhales them suffers a peculiar lassitude, which may wear off in a few days, but leaves the victim without will power for a time. Or, rather, I should say the will is paralyzed, through some strange action of the gas upon the nervous system. Thus thousands of our troops, from the Generals down, have been left without the desire to fight, and have been taken prisoners without resistance."

"But can't we imitate this invention?"

"By the time our chemists would be able to analyze and copy it," groaned the Timur, "there will be nothing left of us! No, I'm afraid, Manu, we're at the end of our resources."

Will reflected for a moment. And, as he did so, an idea shot into his head—an idea so striking, and yet so simple, that he wondered why it had never occurred to him before.

"O Timur," he said, turning to the sovereign with a confident smile, "I believe I have a way of throwing back Murkambu and his hordes."

CHAPTER X

Blue Nitrolene

SOLEMNLY, questioningly the Timur sat staring at Will. His blue eyes were grave with thought; his brows were wrinkled; doubt and perplexity were written in his manner.

"That is a wonderful invention, O Manu, if it is all that you claim. What do you call it?"

"Blue Nitrolene, O Timur. I have experimented upon it for years, and believe it the most deadly weapon ever invented, though the government of my own country would not buy it from me."

"I can well understand that, Manu. If it is all that you say, it is too terrible to be entrusted in human hands. For grown men are but infants when one gives them the tools to destroy. What did you say the principle of this Blue Nitrolene is?"

Will explained how the chemical, a compound of nitrogen, carbon, sulphur and phosphorus, acted as an atomic catalyzer, breaking up the heavier and more complex elements to form the simpler, and consequently causing solid matter to disappear amid a stupendous release of energy.

"Have you the formula with you?" questioned the Timur.

"No, but have I not worked at it for years, making the substance time after time, so that I know every detail of the process by heart. I know your laboratories, Loftiness, are well equipped. I will have no trouble in showing your chemists how to make Blue Nitrolene. It shall not take long—within twenty-

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four hours, I promise you, you shall have a supply!"

"And what is to prevent the enemy from copying it, Manu? So that we all will be worse off in the end?"

"Before the enemy can study it, they will be defeated, O Timur."

"Then has this invention ever been tried in warfare?"

"Never, Your Loftiness. Yet I know what it will accomplish."

"And even if we win, Manu, this weapon will remain in Le-Mur, waiting to be seized by some new rebel leader, who will use it to blow the country to bits. No, Manu! A deadly invention may be worse than any human enemy."

Argue as he would, Will could not convince the Timur. Precisely because the weapon promised to be so effective, the ruler refused to employ it!

And, indeed, except for an unforeseen event, it probably never would have been employed.

A FEW hours later, a conference of the Timur's advisers had gathered in his little underground retreat. General Massupu had just finished a long address, in which he declared that, at the rate Murkambu was advancing, the defending forces could not hold out for another forty-eight hours.

No sooner had he sat down than a tremor, as of an earthquake, was felt. Almost instantly, it was followed by a severer tremor, so violent that all the occupants of the room were flung about like dice in a box. And while they cried out in terror and a third tremor rocked the room, an enormous bulge appeared in the ceiling, and a great pointed mass of metal protruded.

It was a minute before the men, stunned and bruised, were able to recover themselves sufficiently to examine this object.

"By my head! A torpedo!" exclaimed General Massupu, as he staggered up to the metal. "Thank the blessed fates, it was a dud! Otherwise, none of us would be here to tell the story!"

"How could it be a torpedo?" questioned Will. "I thought we were a hundred feet below the Great Cavern."

"Yes, but evidently," Massupu sighed, "Murkambu has torpedoes which will burrow a hundred feet through earth and rock."

A long pregnant silence greeted this remark.

"That means that no matter where we go," at length declared the Timur, "we will not be safe from attack."

"It means the end!" groaned Massupu.

"That is, O Timur," suggested Will, "unless we are willing to try Blue Nitrolene."

The Timur smoothed out his ruffled robe, and stroked his long beard thoughtfully.

"It is either surrender—or the new weapon!" asserted Minister of Defense Hamur.

"There is no time to lose, either," put in Massupu. "Shall it be said that we gave in when even the tiniest chance for victory remained?"

"Victory? Victory?" flung back the ruler, as his tall tottering form paced the floor in agitation. "What victory can there be now? No matter how the war ends, we are all defeated! Our lives are blasted, our country torn up! Our only choice is—the least among many evils!"

"The least among many evils is Blue Nitrolene, O Timur!"

But the sovereign still hesitated; and might have continued to hesitate, had a fresh upheaval not shaken the room for more than a minute with earthquake throes. This time no protruding mass of metal was seen; but all

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faces were pale, all eyes distended with alarm.

"You see, Your Loftiness," said General Massupu, "there is no tunnel deep enough to protect us."

"True," admitted the Timur, sadly. And then reluctantly, bitterly, in the manner of one who passes a death sentence. "Perhaps, as you may say, Manu, Blue Nitrolene is the least among many evils. Largun-see, our Minister of Chemistry, will conduct you to our laboratories, whose entire facilities are to be placed at your disposal. It is my order!"

But as Will arose and started out in company with Largun-see, the Timur's gloomy mutterings followed him.

"Heaven help us now! Heaven forgive me for this choice!"

. . . . . .

NEVER had Will seen any laboratory so excellently equipped as the one to which Largun-see led him. Covering several acres of a gallery below the Great Cavern, it was provided with every instrument that Will had ever seen or imagined, and scores that he had neither seen nor imagined. There was every variety of test-tube and retort; electrical devices for converting great quantities of water instantly into steam, and for turning steam to ice; inter-atomic machines, shaped like seige-guns, for dissociating the elements; engines, looking like cabinet radios, which would make qualitative analyses of most substances as rapidly as an adding machine would total a column of figures; as well as immense quantities of most of the less unstable elements and more common compounds.

Best of all!—there were dozens of skilled assistants ready to serve Will's every nod and call—a striking contrast to the one-man home laboratory where he had previously worked and made all his discoveries!

Thanks to these facilities, it was only a few hours before he was in possession of some of the innocent-looking sea-blue compound that was to decide the fate of Le-Mur.

CHAPTER XI

The Destroyer Breaks Loose

WILL has always maintained that he never made more than a few grams of Blue Nitrolene during all this time in Le-Mur. He has always claimed that this amount, although capable of causing prodigious damage, would not of itself have sufficed to produce the unparalleled catastrophe that brought his days in the underground world to their dread climax. Some unidentified foreign substance, in quantities almost too slight for detection, must have been mixed with the Blue Nitrolene in the course of its manufacture, and produced a change in some of its essential characteristics, and a heightening of its potency.

Such, at least, is Will's explanation. For the fact remains that Blue Nitrolene, terrible as it was in the experiment that I witnessed in Will's laboratory, p r o v e d inconceivably m o r e frightful among the caverns of Le-Mur.

Only a few hours after the first mild-looking particles had been produced in the laboratory, the forces of Murkambu were to be confronted with a new weapon—and one that, for sheer horror, and destructiveness, put to shame such puny devices as the Eagle Torpedoes and the Sky Serpents.

It was a company of Crawl Troopers who first encountered the Blue Nitrolene as they wound, bellies to earth, through one of the wide branching galleries beneath the Great Cavern. Their advance had been strangely un-

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impeded; and, feeling that the Timur's resistance was about at an end, they had gone forward for miles, and were ready to sweep into the main cavern itself and take possession of some of the outposts of the Timur's capitol. Then suddenly, in front of them, through a long narrow shaft in the earth, a projectile was dropped.

It was no larger than an orange, and consisted of a glass sphere, which shattered on striking and released several tiny pale blue particles. But no sooner had the foremost of the Crawl Troopers caught a glimpse of the blue specks than a change came over the entire scene.

Almost instantly, there was a hissing as of a thousand steam exhausts in simultaneous action. Spouts of smoke, and clouds of sulphurous vapor shot toward the cavern roof; a bubbling arose from the floor, which began to glare and seethe, with an effervescence as of a powerful acid devouring a metal; and, extending from small foci, the bubbling patches spread in concentric circles, like slowly widening ripples on a pond . . . until, after a minute or two, the entire floor was a molten, fuming, blazing mass.*

AT the same time, a torrid heat shot out from the center of infection. The skins of the men were blistered, their eyebrows were singed, the clothes of some of the foremost took fire. Panic arose among them; with cries as of trapped animals, they sprang to their feet; and, thrusting, shoving, squirming, fighting with fists and elbows, they battled their way back toward safety. But many of them, overcome, lay writhing in the path of the destroyer, whose hissing, seething waves spread out to consume them.

Before the day was over, a score of companies of Murkambu's troops had met the same fate. Every advance guard of the rebels had been routed; and several of the main contingents had been driven back before the glowing, steaming fury that was everywhere dissolving the solid rock and earth.

Within less than three days, raids had been made into Murkambu's territory, and bombs containing small quantities of the blue destroyer had been dropped by "do-and-die" squads of loyal soldiers—one or two of whom, unexpectedly, survived and returned to tell of the consternation they had caused, the disruption of normal life, the panic flight of the populace, who fled in stampeding crowds, while the sizzling foe ate through the pavements of cities and the walls of buildings with an insatiable, irresistible, unceasing rapacity.

The Sight-Sound Relayer, meantime, had confirmed the stories, and had shown streets gashed with enormous craters, which slowly widened, while black fumes arose from the flaming depths; solid hillsides which melted, and ran in rivers that gradually dissolved in gas; and great masses of machinery, with steel rods, wheels and boilers, which disappeared like kindling wood in a conflagration.

It seems strange, when one recalls the subsequent cataclysm, that the general danger was not at first realized. It was thought—and Will confesses that he shared in the general delusion—that only Murkambu's territory was

*Obviously the effect here is of a progressive atomic disintegration, although not on an absolute scale, so that matter is annihilated completely, and changed into energy. Rather, there is a disruption of normal material forms into other normal material forms, with a partial release of energy in the process. The result of such releases of energy might be compared to the burns (on human flesh) caused by radium emanations. A great amount of damage is done to flesh in this manner, by contagion, and resultant irritation not in itself the action of the original agency.—Ed.

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menaced. Hence there was rejoicing among the Timur's followers.

"A few days more, and we will have crushed Murkambu's resistance!" they said. "A few days more, and we will have won the war!"

Time was to prove their predictions correct—so far as they went. But it was also to prove that they did not go far enough.

ONE day the Timur was sitting in his underground retreat, amid a group of his advisers. Although it had been impossible for him to return to his palace of many-domed crystal, which had been wrecked by rebel raiders, he was in a happier mood than for many weeks. He was smiling once more with his old patriarchal benignity; and the luster had come back into his eyes, which had been wont to look dull and faded of late.

"Yes, Your Loftiness," General Massupu was informing him, "there are only a few more active contingents of Murkambu's troops in the field—and it will take us but another day or two to subdue them."

"Thanks be to the Manu!" exclaimed the ruler, fervently, with a nod in Will's direction. "We will have to decorate him with the Purple Plume of the Loyal Defenders, the highest honor we can grant."

"But the ruin caused by this war—it will take us many years to repair it!" sighed Minister of Construction Zampum. "Our cities are mere debris—"

He was interrupted by a peculiar whizzing and buzzing from a horn-shaped brass instrument to his right. And he pressed a little button at one end, and instantly the room was filled with a booming voice. For the machine, which was a development of the Sight-Sound Relayer, performed the same functions as our telephone, except that one did not have to listen through a tube but could hear at a distance of many feet.

"The Timur! His Loftiness the Timur! I would speak with the Timur!" shouted the voice.

"Who is it?" called back Minister Zampum.

"It is I, Minister of Defense Hamur! Would you have my password?"

Several words, whose meaning Will could not recognize, were spoken; then the Timur raised his voice:

"What is it, Zampum? It is I, the Timur! Where are you? What do you want?"

"Important tidings, Your Loftiness! Important tidings! I am now at the front! I have received a message from Murkambu!"

The Timur's voice trembled just a little as he inquired:

"And what is the message, Zampum?"

"He wishes to arrange a conference, Your Loftiness. To sue for peace."

THE assembled men stared at one another with significant smiles; several thankful sighs were heard.

"Peace is what we all want," replied the Timur. "But it must be on our own terms."

There was a brief pause before the voice of the invisible resumed,

"No, Your Loftiness, it must be on his terms."

Oaths and mutterings were heard throughout the room.

"What is that, Zampum?" demanded the ruler, in a voice of resentment. "Have you gone off to the enemy's side? If Murkambu sues for peace, why must we grant it on his terms?"

Another weighted pause ensued; and then the reply was heard, distinct and emphatic:

"Because, O Timur, there is a greater

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enemy than Murkambu at the doors. Because we must fight at his side to throw down a foe that threatens us all."

"But there is no foe beside Murkambu!"

"Indeed there is, O Timur! Murkambu sues for peace not for fear of our warriors, but for fear of Blue Nitrolene. It spreads everywhere like a plague. It eats away buildings, and undermines galleries, moving in ever wider circles. It menaces both sides alike. Ask Minister of Construction Zampum. Yes, ask him—and after that I will speak with you again."

Gravely the Timur turned toward his Minister of Construction.

"What is this, Zampum, that you have been keeping from me?"

Zampum's face turned a flaming red.

"There was no need to alarm you, O Timur, for we thought a remedy would be found. But it is truly as Hamur has said. Blue Nitrolene keeps spreading like a fire, and we do not know how to quench it. We fear it more than we do the enemy."

A black scowl had lined the Timur's face. Angrily he stalked toward Zampum.

"It is an evil thing," he said, "that I have not been told. Come! I must see for myself! By my beard! If you keep any information from me now—"

With a hasty twist of his fingers, Zampum was adjusting the dials of the Sight-Sound relayer. An instant later, the face of the Timur, as he looked and listened through the instrument, took on an expression of amazement, consternation, horror. For at least five minutes he remained at the machine, twitching slightly; then, in a snapping, decisive manner, he turned toward the horn-shaped brass contrivance.

"Hamur? Still there?" he demanded.

"Yes, Your Loftiness!"

"Then get into touch with Murkambu at once! Tell him that his terms are accepted!"

With a sigh, the Timur sank back; and, panting heavily, had to be supported by two of his followers.

WILL meantime had hastily adjusted the Sight-Sound Relayer to his eyes and ears, and had caught glimpses of smoking craters, wide as those of volcanoes, into which great buildings were collapsing, while from their flaming depths poured spouts of steam and immense twisting black wreaths of smoke. He saw the streets of a city crisscrossed with spreading fissures, from which thick yellow fumes were rising; and watched the submergence of a whole wide avenue, covered with trees and fountains, which sank with an ear-splitting roar into the blind depths, leaving only dust-clouds and ashes.

"There is indeed a greater enemy than Murkambu," sighed the Timur, still breathing heavily. "We can have no further thought of fighting him now."

Then, turning toward Will with a challenging blaze in his eyes, he demanded,

"You are the one to help us, Manu! You have introduced Blue Nitrolene! Now you must tell us the antidote!"

Ringed about by a circle of hostile faces, Will felt like a stag cornered by hounds. The Ministers, so tolerant and friendly only a few days before, now glared at him with bitter, angry eyes. And Will's heart sank, for he knew that he had no antidote for Blue Nitrolene; that never, in his experiments on earth, had it required an antidote, since it had burned itself out in time. So how would it be possible for him now, without long experimentation, to determine just what had gone wrong and how it could be remedied?

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"Your Loftiness," he replied, "if you will give me but a few days—"

"A few days?" flung back the Timur, savagely. "In a few days, it may be too late!"

"I am sorry, Your Loftiness, but I know of no remedy—"

"Huh! I see it all now!" interrupted General Massupu, pointing a threatening finger at Will. "It is a plot! He was in the employ of Murkambu! It is a scheme to throw us down!"

Concurring murmurs and growls sounded from half a dozen throats.

"It's as clear as light—Fifth Tower penetration!" thundered Minister Zampum. "The miserable spy!"

SEVERAL of the ministers drew closer to Will, bristling, with steely flashing eyes, like wolves preparing to spring.

"Now, now, hold back there!" counselled the Timur, facing his followers sternly. "If the Manu was Murkambu's spy, how is it that his invention threatens our enemy as much as it does us?"

A brief silence greeted this question. But General Massupu was quick to reach the solution,

"Then he is a spy sent from the Upper Air to overthrow all Le-Mur! That is it! He is a spy from the Upper Air!"

Even the Timur gave a start at this accusation; and Will could see the growing enmity in the eyes of every one present.

"Why should I be a spy from the Upper Air?" he attempted to protest . . . when he was cut short by furious cries.

"Down with him! Throw him out! Take him away! To the Obliteration Rooms!"

It was with difficulty that the Timur quieted the disturbance. The ministers, forgetting their self-control, seemed bent upon finding a scapegoat. Their shaking fists, their contorted features, their malevolently shining eyes boded no good for Will as they stormed about him threateningly, while he glared at them in erect, defiant dignity.

"Come! Give the Manu a chance!" ordered the Timur; although his cool glittering glance showed that he too was by no means as friendly as of old. "We will let him seek an antidote for Blue Nitrolene. Surely, if he wishes, he can unmake what he has made. So I will once more open our laboratories to him."

"Largun-see," he went on, turning to his Minister of Chemistry, "you will conduct the Manu back to the Central Laboratory!"

And then to Will, as he started away in the company of Largun-See:

"Make haste, Manu! Remember, the safety of us all may depend upon it!"

From the grim, warning glances cast him by several of the ministers, Will knew that, regardless of the safety of Le-Mur as a whole, his own safety did assuredly depend upon the speed he made.

CHAPTER XII

To the Black Tower

WILL'S eyes, as he bent over the blue vials on the laboratory table, were red-and bloodshot. His lean form twisted and untwisted like a reed in the wind; his fingers twitched; low mutterings came from between his clenched teeth.

"God," he exclaimed, throwing down a test-tube so violently that it shattered, and spilt its sputtering contents over the green porcelain basin, "it's all no use! No use under heaven!"

In the reeling condition of his head, he hardly knew how long he had been

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laboring over the problem. Certainly, for more than two days, during which he had not had three hours of sleep. He was feeling crushed, smothered, like one who does battle with a sand-storm; he should have had months or even years to wrestle with the problem!

Sagging down upon a three-legged stool, he sat with his face buried in his hands; while from just beyond the barred doors a shout arose, followed by the angry mumbling of many voices, which rose and fell, and rose and fell, menacing, insistent, savage. The doors rocked and shook as threatening hands seized them from without, until the whole room seemed to tremble.

"There's no quieting them, Manu," said Largun-see, the Minister of Chemistry, as he came up to Will and tapped him gently on the shoulders. "I never would have believed it possible—our civilized Le-murians becoming so bloodthirsty!"

The voices from without had become louder and more articulate; at every entrance to the laboratory, a mob was clamoring.

"Give us the Manu! Down with the Manu, the Manu! Give us the spy, the traitor! Tear him to bits . . . The spy! . . . The Fifth Towerist! He has ruined our land!"

"Listen, Manu," counselled Largun-see, "better get out while there's still time. Over there to the left, just beyond the Radium Room, there is a trap-door in the floor—"

"Down with the Manu! Down with him! The traitor! The spy! The Fifth Towerist! Tear him to shreds!" clamored the voices, in an increasing din.

Will looked up apprehensively, but shook his head. "No, Largun-see, I'm not going to run—not while there's a ghost of a chance—"

"But the mob, Manu—it's made up of wild beasts. You don't know them. They're hungry for your blood. They blame everything on you—"

The doors were shaking until it seemed as if they could not hold out much longer.

"Manu—Manu—down with him! Grab him, catch him, crush him to bits!" thundered the rabble, while the blows of fists and heavy implements smashed against the barricades.

AT the same time, an even more frightening phenomenon broke out. On the roof just above Will, a sudden bright patch had appeared, to the accompaniment of an ominous sizzling and hissing. Widening from a narrow focus, it spread out in a slowly expanding circle, radiating a furnace heat and giving forth clouds of smoke and steam through a freshly made opening in the roof. Will caught a glimpse of the Great Cavern, although, as he knew, this had been separated from the laboratory by more than ten feet of solid rock!

At his first glimpse of the glaring patch, Largun-see had given a gasp and a sigh. "By my robe! it's the end!" And, without another word, he rushed toward the trapdoor beyond the Radium Room.

Will, as he stared at the devouring fury in a sort of fascinated daze, realized that it was indeed the end. Within a few hours, Blue Nitrolene would have destroyed the laboratory!

Knowing that he had lost the battle; and knowing, also, that this meant the doom of Le-Mur, Will at first had scarcely the ambition to save himself. Why not go down amid the ruins of the world which he had unwittingly destroyed? At the doors of the laboratory, he could still hear those wild-beast cries, "Death to the Manu! Don't let the spy out! Grab the

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traitor! Pound him to bits!" But he scarcely cared if the mob broke in and seized him.

Then all at once—and he could not say just how this happened—it was as if a cry had come to him from a long distance. The face of Ilwanna framed itself before him, Ilwanna violet-eyed and auburn-haired as he had known her, but with her lovely features contorted with a look of terror and distracted pleading.

And suddenly, in some strong but irrational way, the conviction fastened itself upon him that she might not be dead after all. The thought came to him that she might not only be alive, but in need of him; the idea that, if there were so much as one chance in ten thousand that she survived, it was a chance which he must not throw aside.

No! though the world were tumbling about his ears, he must seek her out, must learn the secret of her fate—and if, as he had long assumed, she were beyond his power to find, then he would be no worse off than now.

Just the faintest wisp of a new hope animated him as he hastened along the broiling laboratory, from whose ceiling pebbles and great rocks were beginning to fall. He passed the Radium Room; found the trapdoor, which Largun-see, in his haste, had left open; darted down the winding stairs; and closed the door behind him just as the mob, with a triumphant push, burst in at the further end of the room, with shouts of, "Catch the Manu! Beat him down! Pummel him! Kill him!"

BY a circuitous route, through small winding side-tunnels, he made his way to the surface of the Great Cavern, where he paused in horror and consternation. What a change had come over the huge concrete columns which, shaped like inverted funnels, supported the roof! Bent as by an earthquake, some of them were horribly warped and twisted; others leaned like the famous tower at Pisa; one, with the hissing, seething furies eating away at it, had been severed at the base. And, in the roof, immense bulges had appeared, which seemed to the observer to deepen even as he watched. The marvel was that the roof had not already fallen!

Picking his way across the deep trenches and over heaps of refuse where here and there he could make out a still, man-sized form, Will hastened toward the quarters assigned him some time before by the Timur.

All was in confusion about him. Here and there some stray child ran crying, like a lost dog, looking for its parents; here and there some group of crazed refugees wandered, wailing and tearing at their hair. Old men tottered along on canes, their backs weighted down by burdens, looking for escape they knew not where; mothers trundled along with shrieking children, or fell fainting by the way, to rise and totter onward again; sturdy young men tried in vain to help their women as they struggled from the burning ruins of their homes, staggering on in search of a refuge, past other fugitives who staggered on in the opposite direction.

Blue Nitrolene was, apparently, doing its work thoroughly! To the west there was a continual line of flame; while the dull booming of explosions came time after time to Will's ears, and now and then the earth beneath him shuddered.

In their terror, most of the refugees hardly took any notice of Will; although one or two paused to point with accusing fingers, or even to spit or curse. And there was one—a brawny, baleful-eyed man—who picked up rocks and hurled them in a shower which Will barely managed to escape.

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"Death to the devil!" he cried. A mob arose at his heels and ran after Will; and he might not have been able to save himself had it not been for a timely fissure which opened up between them in the earth, with clouds of black vapor where Blue Nitrolene was spreading from an underground corridor.

Meanwhile the din had grown to ear-splitting proportions. A continuous dull booming, as of distant thunder, was varied by occasional roars and crashings as buildings sagged and tottered; by an incessant rumbling and jarring as great buildings collapsed; and by the shrill hissing and screeching of steam, as geysers broke out from the ground at the most unexpected points.

At the same time, a sweaty, humid heat possessed all things. Foul odors, as of decay, mingled with the deadly stench of escaping chemicals, whose noisome gasses irritated the nostrils and eyes; cinders swirled everywhere on a hot wind, and the smoke-clouds blackened everything.

It was, indeed, the latter fact that enabled Will to make good his escape, for his hands and face became covered with a sooty smear, which served to disguise him, and permitted him to mingle inconspicuously with the refugees, all of whom were likewise besmudged.

HAVING with difficulty reached his rooms, Will found one of the flashlights he had taken with him from the Upper Air; equipped himself with some compressed food, and water, and set out toward Murkambu's mansion.

In a straight line, on the surface roads, the distance was not more than a few miles, but it seemed to Will that he struggled for hours through that seething, horror-stricken world. Once he almost slipped and lost his life in a deep crevice in the earth; a little later, he was threatened by a madman, who ran about in wild circles, swinging a club and howling menace at every passer-by; again, he had to go around a vast area in which a pit as deep as the Grand Canyon had opened, vomiting forth continual waves of yellow sulphurous vapors. At times he staggered, and felt ready to fall; at times his bloodshot eyes could scarcely make out the path ahead . . .

But always the vision of Ilwanna kept flashing before him, with her appealing, urgent eyes; and he knew that he must not give up until he had had word of her.

How much later it was he could not say, but at last he stood before Murkambu's palace. The pale green and blue fountains had ceased to flow from their tinted bases. The pansies, which had grown as large as saucers, were trampled and broken; the ground was strewn with ash; ash covered the walls of the bubble mansion, which, once glowing with a luminous pearly light, was now dull and lifeless of hue.

In the alabaster court, where Will had first seen Ilwanna by means of the Pellucid Depth Ray, a fountain of smoke and fire had sprung up; the busts of the venerable men and Venus-like women had fallen from their pedestals; the walls of the buildings, with their beautiful painted inscriptions, were dented and crumbling.

With a sigh, Will passed on to the main entrance of the palace. The door stood open; but all was dark and silent inside. The furniture was strewn about in confusion, bearing every sign of a hasty departure; but no servant walked those unlighted aisles, no guard stood at attention, no spear gleamed, no voice sounded. Will felt as if he had entered a tomb—all the more so when the thought of his beloved came to him,

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and he murmured, beneath his breath,

"Ilwanna, where are you? Where are you?"

For many minutes he wandered through the courts and salons, his lungs choked with the vapors that were pouring in in ever-thickening streams. Was he not engaged on a mad quest? In his heart, he believed so—yet in his heart he knew he could not quit, not while the burning image of Ilwanna remained with him, her violet eyes beseeching,

"Make haste, beloved, make haste!"

AT last, between two ash-scarred colonnades where blue hydrangeas had bloomed, he met an old, bent man who wandered witlessly to and fro and wore the drab yellow uniform of the servant class.

"The Upper Air devils," he kept muttering to himself, in an incoherent, aimless manner, "the Upper Air devils have destroyed us!" and then, glancing at Will with eyes that spoke no recognition, "Is it not so, friend, the Upper Air devils have destroyed us!"

"Yes, the Upper Air devils!" agreed Will, to humor him.

The old man spat out in disgust, and was repeating his statement as if it were something new, when Will questioned him,

"Tell me, old father, do you know where Murkambu is?"

"Murkambu? Murkambu?" repeated the man, as if striving to grasp at an idea that eluded him. "He is gone, gone—they are all gone, gone! Run away from the Upper Air devils!"

"And Murkambu's daughter, Ilwanna? Do you know where she is?"

Will's voice trembled as he put the question, but the old man merely went rambling on.

"The Upper Air devils—they have destroyed us, destroyed us!"

In his impatience, Will seized the old man, and shook the frail frame.

"Murkambu's daughter — Murkambu's daughter!" he repeated. "Ilwanna—Murkambu's daughter—do you know where Ilwanna is?"

"Ilwanna? Ilwanna?" echoed the dotard, in a wailing, wandering voice. "Ilwanna? Ilwanna? The Upper Air devils have destroyed us—"

But Will shook his victum more energetically than ever, and at last a faint gleam came into the faded eyes.

"Ilwanna? Ilwanna? Was she not the fair one, the lovely elf—he whom the Leader locked in the Black Tower?"

"The Black Tower? Black Tower?" gasped Will. But by no amount of violence or urging could he extract any further information. "The Upper Air devils," the man went on raving, "Upper Air devils have destroyed us—destroyed us!"

Yet even the fragment of information —incomplete and unsupported as it was —had come as a breath-taking revelation. For was it not possible that Ilwanna was alive after all?—alive although a prisoner in the Black Tower?

CHAPTER XIII

Ordeal by Fire

THE Black Tower was well deserving of its name. Surrounded by a deep moat and high coal-black walls, it was draped in perpetual mourning as it stood on a low ridge of earth some distance back of Murkambu's home. A tall stone edifice, with only a few narrow light-slits in place of windows, it was known as a place where political offenders languished, sometimes for years, without a trial and without prospect of release.

But if ordinarily repulsive, it was doubly so now. The roof of the cavern was caving in above it in a hundred-

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foot bulge, shaped like a half orange. The ground about it was plowed up as by a gigantic dredge, and a crater that erupted jets of flaming liquid was widening in front of it, with connecting fissures that gave promise of devouring the entire edifice at almost any moment. And the heat, like that of a bake oven, blew over Will in searing breaths as he approached, and made him doubt if he would be able to reach it alive.

"God in heaven," he thought, "if there's anybody in there now, most likely he's cooked to a cinder!"

His lips were parched and cracking; his throat was dry; his limbs were burning in a fever-heat, but still he dragged his way on, around the crater with its spouts of blazing liquid, and toward the open main entrance of the Tower, from which the guards had evidently long departed.

As he passed through the gateway, he thought he could hear faint groans from somewhere within; and feeble, broken cries. He paused for a moment; snatched the keeper's keys from a rack on a leaning wall; and started inside. As he did so, the floor shook with a lurch as of a speeding train rounding a curve; and Will was thrown from his feet. Recovering himself, he saw that a crack inches wide had opened in the ceiling; while the floor was still trembling.

Guided only by his flashlight, he started along the dark aisle, which wound sharply, so narrow as barely to permit his passage. On either side were small iron doors, to some of which he applied his keys. But the first of them to open showed an empty room; the second let out a cloud of nauseous vapors, from which he had to flee precipitately; and the third revealed a lean, silent, grimly unresponsive form.

"Too late! Am I too late?" he wondered, as his keys slid into the lock of the fourth door. An instant later, an emaciated figure with streaming white hair came tottering toward him.

"Forgotten! All, all forgotten!" he thought he heard this bony apparition mourning, in a voice reminding him of a gibbering shade. Then, with his hands clutched over his breast, the figure reeled and fell; while a crash as of exploding dynamite thudded upon Will's ears, and the entire building shook.

Knowing the poor sufferer to be beyond his aid, he wandered on. In fast waning hope, he pounded on each door as he passed, calling out fearfully, automatically,

"Ilwanna! Ilwanna!"

But the echoes of his own voice came back to mock him along those twisted aisles.

"Ilwanna! Ilwanna!"

His head swayed in delirium; he gasped and coughed as the hot vapors choked his lungs; and once or twice he fell on a dark stairway. Surely, the one he sought was not to be found here!

BUT still he raised his cry, more feebly now,

"Ilwanna! Ilwanna, Ilwanna!" Was it only that he imagined that at last there came an answering call? What was that voice, thin, remote, unreal,

"Will, Will, Will?" Surely, his fevered mind was playing him tricks. But was not the sound repeated, "Will, Will! . . . This way, Will! . . . Here, here, here!" No! It must all be a cruel delusion!

Then suddenly his brain had regained its clarity. Suddenly his senses were alert, active. The sound—he knew now that it was not mere imagination!—came from above him, from beyond a twisted flight of stairs. Perhaps it was but the voice of a madman mocking him—still, did it not have a familiar ring?

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Up the stairs he dashed, though there came a jolt that seemed almost to shake the building off its foundations. Beyond a barred door he paused, while his fingers fumbled with the keys. For a moment he could not find any to fit the lock; while from outside there rang a series of thunderous detonations that drowned out the voice from within.

Then the key was turning in its socket; the door swung open; and toward him, with a swooning movement, there sagged a figure which he half recognized, and yet did not recognize, so distraught was she.

"Ilwanna!" he cried; and clasped her even as she was falling to the stone floor.

IT was not until much later that he learned her story: how she had been knocked unconscious yet had escaped serious injury in the second rock-slide in the tunnel, which had finally separated her from Will; how she had been taken by Murkambu's men to the palace of her father, who had seen through her disguise and in his rage had sentenced her to the Black Tower; how she had been forgotten there, when her father and all his retainers had taken flight, owing to the devastation of Blue Nitrolene; but how, having been provided with more food and better accommodations than ordinary prisoners, she had managed to survive, though she was now at the end of her resources.

Her beautiful cheeks smeared with dirt, her eyes burning and tear-reddened, her lovely hair hanging wildly and disorderly over her face, her limbs shaking with weariness, she looked little more than the ghost of her former self—although after a little time, with rest and food, she would become once more the old radiant Ilwanna.

So, at least, Will thought as he held her, clinging and weeping, in his arms But only for a few seconds could they remain clasped together.

As if to prove this no time for love making, the house gave another spasmodic heave; while through the narrow slit of the window they could see hungry red tongues of flame reaching toward the cavern roof.

"Come!" Will murmured; and half led, half supported her down the twisted stairway, and into the glaring outer world. He was astonished to note how the erupting crater, with its flaming liquid jets, had widened during his short stay in the tower. Well for him that he had left the building! For, not five minutes after his escape, there came a roar as if the heavens were crashing; a mountain of crimson light jutted upward, with cascades of scattering sparks; and the entire tower, falling like a child's castle, was lost in the crater's fuming abysses.

But Will and Ilwanna had hardly time to look back at the dread spectacle. Though their heads ached and their fagged limbs rebelled, somehow they forced their way onward—onward toward the Golden Range, where Will had entered Le-Mur, and where he hoped to find the cave entrance that led back toward the Upper Air.

HOW they managed to reach this haven, after hours of tormented struggling, was more than he was ever able to explain. Everywhere they saw refugees groaning, or lying crushed by fallen stones; everywhere they saw the fissures in the ground widening, flame, smoke and steam pouring forth more voluminously. Yet finally they stood before the narrow tunnel in the earth, which, almost choked with rocks where Will had blasted his way out, showed a dark crevice barely wide enough to permit a man to wriggle through.

"The way back to the Upper Air

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. . . if we can make it," murmured Will. "Are you willing to come with me, Ilwanna?"

"I am willing to go to the world's end with you, beloved."

As they stood looking back across the Great Cavern from the height of the Golden Range, they saw nothing but a waste of flame and cinders—a landscape dotted with steaming geysers, smoking craters, roofless buildings with their shattered interiors flung about like the entrails of slaughtered monsters.

Through the thickening smoke-clouds, a line of bloody red was spreading all about them; the roof-supporting columns were bent at every angle; waves seethed and rolled and noxious vapors poured where hills and valleys had been; while, with a low rumbling, the very roof began to tremble, and crash.

"Quick, for God's sake! It's the end, the end!" groaned Will. And, forcing Ilwanna ahead of him, he helped and pushed her through the little black crevice into the cave.

Even as he did so, they were stunned by a deafening roar, which pitched them both forward to the earth. And, while the reverberations still rang in their ears, they stared into a sudden blackness. The lights of Le-Mur had gone out!

As they began creeping through the cave, by the rays of Will's flashlight, a long blended wail as of myriads of terrorized men and women reached them from the depths of the doomed world.

THREE days later a party of scientists, exploring one of the limestone caverns that threaded the Whitley Range, came across two persons whom at first they took for dead—a man and a woman clasped in one another's arms, who appeared to have perished of hunger or exhaustion. It was only by degrees that they managed to revive the unconscious victims, who for days lingered near the dread border-line, before at last, thanks to the best of attention, they were restored to life and health.

The reader will, of course, recall the national sensation that was caused when it was found that the man was none other than Will Claybrook, the missing inventor; while the woman, who became his wife as soon as they were able to go through the ceremony, was reported to be a daughter of ancient Le-Mur.

Following his return, Will was a changed man. He no longer gave himself whole-heartedly to science; instead, he concentrated on a book on "The Life and Customs of the Le-Murians," which, he said, would occupy him for years. But there was a grimness about him, as of a man returned from the other side of the grave. I remember how, one evening when I paid him a visit, he was staring as of old through the eyepiece of the Pellucid Depth Ray; while at his side, shiningly beautiful and statlier than ever, stood the very person whom he had once delighted to observe through the same machine.

"See, Tom," he said, motioning to the eyepiece, "all that is left of Le-Mur!"

I looked; and before my eyes there spread the enormous reaches of the Great Cavern, the roof in places fallen, and mile-deep abysses scooped out where the floor had once been. From the depths, fuming vapors arose in sultry clouds, illuminated by the dull-red light of smoldering fires; but nowhere could I see even the tatters of a building, even a sign that human life had ever inhabited these voids.

"At last Blue Nitrolene burns itself out!" he stated, solemnly. "A few days more, and the Depth Ray will show us —blackness!"

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WHEN THE DARKNESS CAME

By WILLIAM De LISLE

THE Mad Years were reaching their climax—the logically inevitable culmination of the fantastic century that had gone before. It was as if some mystic Spider of cosmic malignance had bitten the Earth; its poisoned, helpless peoples made to dance an ever quickening, ever more convulsive tarantella. Most of them had forgotten how to be still; some had never known. The last tremendous convulsion, and the coma and death beyond, could not have been far away.

How the Darkness came to the world and its civilizations, its rulers and parliaments, its cults and propagandas, its armies and navies and air fleets, its cities and its crowds: of these things I do not write in detail. In such crammed canvasses of the great mass-human for-

Far out in space stars began to wink out. Then the blackness spread to the sun!

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est, the individual human trees are almost lost to sight. I write of just three people, a woman and two men: Margery Doran, Alan Rogers, and Noel Sterling.

Noel Sterling was the rawboned, dreamy-eyed artist whose murals in the new Metropolitan Opera House had made something of a stir the year before—but it would have taken more than that to swell his shy, retiring head. Alan Rogers' name was much more widely known, for he was Captain Rogers, the erratic, record-breaking pilot whose exploits in the air kept him very much in the news. Margery was—just Margery, and no one who knew her would have wished her to be anything more.

Her engagement to the famous airman had come as a surprise to everybody. Neither of them seemed to have very much in common. He was restlessly dynamic; he could never stay quietly in one spot for very long, he must always be doing something, going somewhere. His nerves were high-tension wires, and high-test gasoline raced in his veins. But Margery made you think of a summer day out of doors with a pleasant little wind waving the grass. Where she was, there at least the tarantella would slacken. Poisoned she must have been, for not even she could have escaped from her Age—but she must have had a milder bite than most, or perhaps she had an unusual resistance to its mental bane. (Very few were conscious even of the poison—that was the tragedy of it.) She seemed to find happiness in just being alive; and that may have been what had attracted the airman to her—she gave his high-tension spirit a semblance of the peace he had never really known.

The three of them were on their way to Connecticut, in Captain Rogers' chromium-plated road-plane (you could hardly call it a car), to spend a long week-end at the house of a friend of theirs in the heart of the Berkshires. Because Sterling's old and unassuming roadster had developed "something in the differential," Margery, completely unaware of the secret pain her nearness caused him, had prompted her fiance to offer him a lift.

AT ABOUT the time they stopped in New London for a leisurely lunch, an assistant at the Colonial Observatory in Hong Kong was excitedly awakening his chief, in the dark before the Eastern dawn, with the news of a strange little "blacked-out" area he had detected in the constellation of Lyra. By the time the chief got to the huge reflecting telescope, Vega, the constellation's brightest star, had become a dim blue vanishing speck, and he could see the blackout spreading as he watched, like a blot of soaking ink. Hercules, Draco, Cygnus, and Aquila turned green, then blue, then a misty purple; and before the first light of dawn began to pale the cloudless sky, they were gone.

The chief watched a little longer, solemnly intent, and then, "Something between them and us," he said tersely. "And not so far away, either. We're heading right into it."

He rushed to the telephone to give his government and the world the first vague yet historic warning.

As the concealing light of day spread across the Eastern sky, Australia and Russia took up the story and flashed it to the daylight hemisphere. The blackout was spreading apace, they said, riding up the heavens and quenching constellation after constellation. The whole Solar System, hurtling through Space on its endless, million-mile-a-minute journey toward that spot where, until a few hours ago, Lyra had been shining

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for millenniums, was whirling into some spatial blind spot hitherto unsuspected.

First to go was the radio—the long-wave broadcasting band at the start, then the shorter waves, meter by meter, with an appallingly smooth swiftness, until even the micro-waves were still. Within a few minutes after that, the radiation of heat began to dwindle. Ahead there in Space, Light itself had ceased to exist—and irresistibly the Earth flew on toward the Dark.

In the world's laboratories, scientists grew grimmer with every quick experiment; theory after theory leapt to mind, was considered, was thrown into the discard, until gradually the awful truth grew clearer. Radio waves, heat radiation, light—these travel only by vibration through the ether, whatever the ether itself may be, and—the ether had ceased to carry them.

What little they could do the governments did, each after its own fashion and ideology, but the essential gist of all their messages was the same.

"Go home, and stay there."

Out from store and factory and office streamed the workers of the cities and the towns. Despite panics in some places, and even rioting in a few, and in all some very anxious traffic jams, this urban situation was on the whole well met and handled.

There was just time, before their short-wave radios faded out, to order most of the world's aircraft down to the ground; but on the long-distance routes there were some tragic exceptions.

Shipping in narrow waters was sent either to the nearest port, if near enough, or out to sea, preventing what would otherwise have been a chaos of traffic crammed between coasts which might soon become invisible, and therefore deadly. Even so, the toll of the sea was heavy.

On the railway systems of the world, all through trains were stopped and held at the first stations they reached, and the passengers hurried to such refuges as could be found. For a brief hour or so the Earth was like a kicked ant-hill; like ants its peoples milled and ran, directing or being directed, then the ant-hill quieted, was still—and waited.

BUT there was nobody to direct the three on the road.

They had lingered somewhat over their lunch, dawdled a little longer in the quaint old town's streets, so that it was getting rather late—about four-thirty—by the time they turned into the dirt road that leads to the foothills and then up into the mountains.

You will note the time. It was just before then that the radio began to fade. The first General Warning was heard only in the immediate surroundings of the various broadcasting stations. Captain Rogers' car-set never picked it up at all. In fact, thinking (quite naturally, as many thought at first) that the fading was due to some defect in the set itself, he had already switched it off—much to Sterling's relief, for a crooner's nasal caterwauling had been clashing most abominably with both his artistic temperament and the scenery.

Just as naturally, they missed the more detailed and imperative "repeat" that was sent out a little later throughout the telephone and telegraph companies' networks. There was nothing to prompt them to drive to the nearest telephone or telegraph office. If only they had passed through a village, either then or at any time during the next half-hour, the police might have stopped them and told them, under the general police order to stop all cars. As it was, the only warning they had was from the sky itself. The thing came on

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them just as it must have come over the millions who lived in the Outer Earth, with nothing whatsoever to prepare them for what it was going to mean.

The day had been typical of early summer, pleasantly warm, the sun pouring down its rays from a bright sky of slow-moving cirrocumulus clouds, high and white and clean. Its radiated heat was failing now, cut off by the growing ether-barricade; but the earth had already absorbed nearly a whole day's warmth, was a reservoir of warmth that would take some time to drain, by conduction through the air, to the cold of Outer Space. So the three in the car did not notice this growing impotence of the sun—not until the blackout began on the rays of the visible spectrum, and then everything else was forgotten in their wonder at the changing light.

Wireless, heat, infra-red, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, ultra-violet—so runs the shortening order of the ether-wavelengths. Though wireless and heat had ceased to radiate, the three in the car were still unwarned. Red went out of the spectrum, orange faded after it—and Sterling commented on the wonderful mellow green that had come over earth and sky. One can understand his reveling in that light, for it was amazingly beautiful. They did not look at the sun itself, not yet. One does not normally look at the sun. If they had looked, they would have seen that it also had turned to a golden green.

Then, imperceptibly, the yellow faded out, and the green cooled to a deepening, darkening blue. It was as if an invisible blue veil were spreading over the sky. There was no other color left. In that light the green countryside took on an added bloom, a strange bloom, fast dimming to an under-sea translucency that sent the artist in Sterling into a silent ecstasy—until, from the back seat where he sat alone, he caught sight of his own face over Margery's shoulder, in the rear-view mirror. It too was blue, a ghastly, purpling, corpse-like blue. So also the back of Margery's neck, her hands on the steering wheel. Something queer about that light!

Amazed, he looked for the first time at the sun. It shone between two pale-blue clouds, from a patch of sky that was royal-dark purple; and it shone coldly, hardly brighter than a moon, and darkening even as he looked.

The world now seemed to be shuddering under the shadowing of unseen wings.

"Strange," said Margery, "how dim it's getting." Her words marked the beginning of dread.

THERE was reason enough for dread. Fast came the darkening now. A cloud hid the sun and the world was spectral. The cloud passed, and the sun gloomed like the icy eye of a Gorgon, petrifying all things to the hard horror of an Antarctic Hell.

"Good heavens!" Sterling exclaimed. "Is the sun . . . going out?"

He bit his lip. You may think that sort of thing, but you must not say it.

"Hell, it *is* getting dark," said Rogers, with a halting catch in his voice like that of a swimmer who finds the water cold. "Let me take the wheel. I'll drive. I don't know what's happening, but we'd better be moving along. . . . Can hardly see the road now. . . . Holy smoke!" He had switched on his headlights and they had apparently failed to come on. He knew the battery was well charged. Yet—no sign of light on the road. And the dash-light, which should have lit up clearly, showed only a dim violet-blue, hardly visible at all. "I don't like this," he grunted, peering ahead into the incredible darkling. "And it's getting worse."

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A sudden roughness under the right wheels. Sharply, a little too sharply, he swung for the middle of the road again, over-swung, and had to yank the wheel back.

"You'd better stop," said Margery. "We can't go on like this. What can it be? What—what's the matter with everything?"

Nobody answered, but Rogers obeyed her. There was nothing else to do. Night had come striding hours ahead of time, a night that even his powerful lights could not penetrate—yet the sun still hung in the sky, like a drowned thing glimmering with a dying phosphorescence through the depths of an airy sea.

Still preoccupied with the failure of the lights, the airman got out of the car and went to have a look at them. He could not yet realize that the lighting mechanism of man had to share in the sun's eclipse; that all light, no matter whence it came, was fading. The headlights showed just the faintest purplish glow in the filaments themselves, casting no light whatever on the road.

He straightened himself up, stood still a moment, shut his eyes tight. He opened them again, shivered a little, and came back to lean over the door of the car. A bluish spark glowed under the top. One of the others had turned on the tonneau light, but it was as useless as the headlights. Somehow Rogers crushed back the panic that had assailed him.

"I'm afraid I . . . can't drive any more," he told them in a choked voice. "I—I'm going blind."

"We're all going blind," Margery answered, hardly above a whisper. "But —why?"

For a little while they were silent. Sterling and Margery in their seats, Rogers leaning in through the window, their minds struggling under wave upon breaking wave of wild imaginings. Was this some mysterious infection of the eye that had stricken all three simultaneously?

Then: "We're not the only ones in trouble," said Sterling in a voice of dawning awe. "Listen to the birds."

AT THAT, the other two realized that for some time they had been hearing a bird-crying akin to the settling twitter of dusk, but louder, with an unwonted uneasiness in it. Until the artist's sensitive ears and mind had caught and interpreted that note, they had heard without listening. Now, as they listened, it was as if all the wild things around the countryside were groping in blundering terror for their nests and holes and burrows, crying to their mates and their young, crying one poignant blended question to all the unanswering universe.

Motionless they listened, in a daze that took them outside and beyond Time. To describe that state there is but one word, the old Bible word: they were astonied—with fear and wonder.

"The sun shall be darkened . . ."

Was that awful spectral orb about to set for the last time?

Another cloud passed before it, and the world went black, with a blackness that seemed to them absolute. They had yet to experience real blackness.

The only light remaining was the cloudy blur where the sun had been, a blur as ghostly as the dash light had been. (Their puny head lights and the one under the top had died altogether now.) The three stared at that blur in dread, fearing every moment that it would fade out and leave them utterly to the dark. But as the cloud-veil thinned and passed, the sun's ball took shape again, and now they stared at it as if to will it to stay.

For a time it seemed that it obeyed

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them. Either the Thing slowed now in its action, or the shorter end of the ether waveband held out more tenaciously against it, the ripples persisting though the longer waves had gone. The sun sank to its setting, a phantom of the sky, a-flicker with strange unsteady little rays of dimmest violet, fading, fading behind the thickening air-veil, and at last . . . gone.

And now there was blackness indeed, absolute, blind.

For a time that was outside Time, then, they waited, helpless, dumb, almost without power of thought—three spirits stunned and drifting in a Void.

Then the first paralyzing shock began to pass. The mind groped again for the snapped and tangled wires of Reason, restoring the shorted circuits of the brain, until the inward lights came on again, dim at first with the uncertainly pulsing current, but gradually gaining strength and clearness.

It was Sterling, the artist, the man of temperamental imagination, who was the first to stir himself, to grasp at something of the truth that the birds had tried to tell. He grasped it more quickly and much more clearly than the aviator. The matter-of-fact brain is at home only in a matter-of-fact world. Turn the world suddenly upside down, tear up the rails on which it runs, hurl the whole thing out into the blank mystery that stretches illimitably above, below, on either hand—and only that leaping genius which is so often said to be akin to madness can even begin to guess at what has happened, let alone brace himself to fight for life and reason.

This was no mere human blindness, but something wrong in Nature herself, some huge deficiency in a law which one had always accepted as perfect and unchanging. That thought was terrifying in itself—it left no certainty anywhere. If Light had failed, then the rest of Nature's machinery could as easily follow it. The ground might open underfoot and let them through. They might be swung off dizzily into Space, with gravitation but a remembered dream. At any moment.

But those things had not happened yet, Sterling told himself, and there was Margery to think of. That steadied him.

So the dreamer became practical—while the one whom the world would have called the practical man of the two, the doer, the up-to-the-minute product of the Gasoline Age, still leaned there against the car, entranced and futile.

CAPTAIN ROGERS could have met any normal emergency of the road with that cold-blooded yet instantaneous reaction which is par excellence the stamp of the top-rank pilot. Indeed, it was only when meeting emergencies in the air that he really felt alive. But this was not one of them. He had lived by machinery all his life; but now it was as if some nightmare metamorphosis had changed it all to a pile of junk. His world was gone, and in this new black world he was an utter stranger, far more terribly lost than by any mere physical blindness.

"How far," Sterling asked, "to the nearest village?"

Rogers started, came half out of his nightmare, gave muttered answer. "I don't know. I can't remember . . ."

He could hardly be expected to remember; he had only been over that road once before. When a man is used to speeding through the countryside at anywhere between fifty and eighty miles an hour, he does not take any notice of the small villages he passes.

"Maybe the road-map," he muttered, and fumbled for it and for his flashlight.

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But the flashlight did not even show a glow. Not the most powerful searchlight on the planet could have given light now.

The flashlight dropped on the seat. The map fluttered after it.

Silence.

"We can't stay here," Sterling insisted.

"We can't drive on—through this," said Margery.

"Then we'll have to leave the car and walk."

"Leave the car?" Rogers cried, as if Sterling had suggested some lunacy. Pause. All three felt a shrinking sensation. It was like the thought of plunging, at midnight, into a black river of unknown currents, full of unseen rocks and dangers.

"We'll have to stay where we are," the airman said tonelessly, "until this lets up."

"There's no telling when it will let up," Sterling countered, wondering in his appalled mind if it ever would. "I don't want to frighten anybody, and I know it all seems absolute madness, but we got to face facts. We haven't any food, for one thing, and—"

"But," Margery broke in, "we can't even see the road ahead of us."

"We can feel it with our feet. And it's bound to lead us somewhere. Come on! The longer we wait the worse it'll be . . . I'll take the left. You walk between us, Margery. One of us'll feel it right away if we stray off the road on either side. We'll have to link arms, too, or we may lose each other."

That precaution was prompted by another ghastly flash of imagination. Suppose sound ceased also, and they could not call to each other?

Sound-waves, however, t r a v e l through the air, a material substance. Only the destruction of matter itself could have destroyed sound. So from the added horror of silence the world was safe.

"Anything we want to take with us?" Sterling went on.

There was another hesitating pause. Everything they had with them, except what they could actually carry, would have to be left with the car—and civilized man abandons his possessions no more eagerly than he does his wheels.

"My coat," said Margery.

"Yes, w'd better take our coats. It may be quite a while before we find some kind of shelter, and it may get cold later on."

"Oh, and my golf shoes," added Margery. "I couldn't walk very far in these."

STERLING nodded approvingly in the dark, thanking Heaven for Margery's common sense. There was some delay while she felt for her bag and then for the shoes—they were all three incredibly clumsy in their sudden blindness. Yet there was a spark of brightening light somewhere within them. The end of that idle waiting, the thought of trying to do something for themselves, was strangely heartening now. Once the crucial effort of decision has been made, it always is.

So they started, floundering three abreast along the unseen road, veering from side to side, stumbling much at first, then gradually gaining confidence, giving up their futile, instinctive attempts to see where they trod, learning to walk with heads up, as the blind walk, using all their other senses to the utmost.

But for an occasional sweep of uneasy wind in the nearby bushes and trees, their hesitating footsteps made the only sound in a vast silence—for even the birds were quiet now. It was as though the world had gone dumb with fear.

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"If we only knew what it was," Margery burst out once.

"How in Heaven's name can we?" came Rogers' answer, high-pitched, almost in a snarl. Sharply, and just as instinctively as he had reached for his map and flashlight back at the car, Margery turned her head toward him in surprise—but saw only the unutterable blackness. And it was then that she felt the first stirring of that sixth sense which, in greater or less degree, came back with the Darkness to all us humans from the depths of our aeons-lost animal past. She felt the strained aura of him, and shivered at the barely suppressed panic that was in it—and shrank away from it, toward the quieter aura of controlled calm that was Sterling. An unthinking reaction, of which she was instantly ashamed. Alan was her man, and he needed her.

The airman felt her arm tighten in his. For a while that pressure, and the dimly felt force of heart and mind that flowed through it, had a quieting effect on his hard-pressed spirit.

"There's no *way* of knowing," Sterling was saying. "But we're still alive and well, and we're on our way to shelter. That's enough to go on with. We'll just have to take things as they come."

But as he spoke it struck him that they might easily pass very close by the shelter they sought—a house, or a side-road leading to a farm—without knowing that they were there. It was no use looking for lighted windows. They might hear footsteps or voices, or perhaps the whining or barking of a dog, that was all. They would have to shout at intervals, then, and listen for an answering call, and if they heard it, try to find their way toward it by its sound.

Sterling had no more than the ordinary man's elementary ideas of science. Margery's remark, "If only we knew what it was," kept ringing in his brain, and he struggled in a morass of futile speculation. Realizing its futility, he managed to struggle out again. It was not science they needed now so much as human courage, a thing more of the spirit than of the mind.

ALL three fought for it as they struggled on. Rogers fought instinctively, desperately, a losing battle against demons of fear. Margery . . . was schooling herself to endure. If she were frightened, as she must have been, she gave little sign of it now. Perhaps she was leaning on Sterling, as women have leaned on men, in extremity, from the world's dawn. Or perhaps she was herself strengthend by the knowledge that Rogers was leaning on her. Later, Sterling was to see something of her real strength, and draw fresh courage from it.

He himself was battling with demons more sinister and far more explicit than the airman's, for though this blackness was literally pressing on his eyes, there was still light in his mind, the lurid light of the wild imaginings to which his temperament led him. Imagination had helped him to withstand the first shock, but now it was pressing him hard.

Until suddenly it came to him—a realization toward which he had been groping from the first—that he was the leader there. He must try to think of the immediate things.

"How much further did we still have to go to the Warrentons' place?" he asked.

"Eh?" Rogers said dully. "Oh . . . about thirty miles, I think. We'll never get there now."

"I'm not trying to get there," Sterling answered, with rigidly suppressed impatience. Why couldn't the man pull himself together? What was the sense of blurting out obvious things like that?

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"I'm just trying to figure out how soon, at the latest, we're apt to run into some sort of habitation again. Try and remember. Is there anything in between?"

"There's a little village about three miles this side of the place."

"Can't you remember anything nearer?"

"I tell you I don't know this road," Rogers flamed out. "If I had only looked at that damn map before the light went—"

"All right," Sterling broke in sharply, trying to inject a steadying command into his voice. "We'll just keep going then till we do strike something . . . It's like playing a new game, this. We'll have to make up the rules as we go along. We'll start with Rule One now. Stop and shout."

They shouted, but no answer came.

"Better luck next time," Sterling commented. "Anybody like a smoke?"

"I'll have one, Noel," said Margery.

He took out his case, felt for a cigarette and put it in her hand. He struck a match—he heard it strike, but failed to see the slightest hint of a flame. Nor could he see to light her cigarette for her. Even in those small things they would have to learn new rules. He handed her the match-box.

"Better light your own," he told her. "You can feel to do it better than I can." Then he exclaimed suddenly as the match he had been holding in his hand burned down and scorched his fingers.

IF STERLING had possessed a scientific brain, those things would have told him much. Matches could still burn, but their burning could not be seen, could not even be felt except by actual contact with the flame or with the heated air that radiated from it. If matches could still burn, then so could the sun; but the same failure of the same all-pervading ether had stopped the radiation of the light and heat of both. Here was the key to everything, if only he could have recognized it. If he had recognized it, he might have been forewarned of what was still to come.

As it was, he was warned only of immediate danger—a danger appalling enough. Fire! A dropped match might start a brush fire, a conflagration—and the first they would know of it would be the smell and sound of its burning. Without sight they could never put it out. They might even be trapped in its invisible flames and smoke, run right into the worst of it in a blind attempt to escape. And the danger was not only to themselves. The weather had been dry lately. A forest fire would do terrible things if unchecked.

Rule Two!

"Be very, very careful with that match," he warned the girl. "Be darn sure it's out before you drop it. And when you're finished with your cigarette, tramp on it with your foot—and then feel it with your fingers." And he told her why.

(A little earlier, by telephone and by word of mouth, the governments of the world had been broadcasting the same warning. To some it came too late. Of such tragedies, that of the liner President Roosevelt, in mid-Atlantic, was perhaps the worst. The burned-out hulk was not found for weeks, and the only other clue was a lifeboat filled with frozen bodies.)

How many more of those strange and new dangers and pitfalls, Sterling wondered, would they meet and have to guard against? He would have to be always on the watch for them. If an ordinary everyday action like striking a match had become risky, then risk

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might lurk in almost any of the things that one normally did without thinking. He would have to try always to think before he acted. Could he stand the constant strain of that rigid vigilance?

That brought the demons back again. Suppose this Thing went on, everywhere? Could Life adapt itself to a world without Light? Could Nature herself continue? Did not all plant and animal life, including their own, depend at bottom on light? Without it, how long would it take the world to die? Days, weeks, or months? Or would some sort of life drag on for years before the long-lingering finish came? Wait! Life *could* go on in darkness, life of a sort. There were living things down in the depths of the ocean, beyond the utmost reach of light. And in those weird Kentucky caves . . .

If Nature evolved a land-life that could do the same, what would the darkened world be like a thousand years from now? Would strange new creatures, knowing nothing of each other's livid white hideousness (of course they would be livid white, like a plant that has tried to grow in a cellar), go crawling among rank plant-growths as colorless as themselves?

That was gruesome. He *must* try to keep his mind on the immediate things.

"Tired, Margery?"

"Oh no. I can keep going a long way yet."

Sterling had always been helplessly tongue-tied in her presence, but he felt nothing of that now, because such things as love and sex-attraction and sex-shyness were a million years away, in a life that was past and gone, a dream of another planet.

THEY trudged on, silent, beginning presently to tire, panic never far behind them, watching its chance, seeking the least crack in their spiritual armor.

After a long time, by the feel of the road underfoot they thought they were going uphill, and decided they must have reached the foothills. When they had gone perhaps a mile further they walked suddenly into a belt of clammy cold that nearly gave panic its chance. Then Sterling remembered how a chill damp may rise near a river or a stream, and with that he became conscious of a growing thirst for the first time. But even as he stopped and listened for the sound of running water, he realized they did not dare leave the road. They might never find it again. Only if the road actually crossed the stream, by bridge or ford, could they drink.

The road leveled off again, and seemed to him to turn a little to the left. Probably it was skirting a flank of the hill—there might be a brook not a hundred yards away, there on the right. Sterling was hoping to feel the road turn that way, and after a while his hope was fulfilled. Then the road dipped promisingly. And finally Rogers, on the right, floundered into the stone coping of a bridge.

In single file, with great caution, holding hands at arm's-length, they crept down the bank. Suddenly Rogers, who was leading, tripped and fell forward, breaking the chain.

"Damn!" they heard him groan from below. "It's a railroad!"

"Are you hurt?" Margery cried.

"No, nothing that I can feel. Stay where you are. I'm coming back to you."

Bruised by the fall and scratched by the cinders of the ballast, he felt his way up again. He touched Margery first—and heard her little sigh of relief as he spoke to her.

"Where are you, Alan?" Sterling was feeling for him.

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"Here."

They linked arms again and climbed back on the road.

No water yet—but surely that railroad meant humankind, not too far away.

They crossed the bridge. They had gone about fifty feet on the other side, when: "Who's there?" a voice called, a woman's voice right in front of them—and surprisingly calm.

They stopped dead in the abrupt, astonished joy of it. Margery was the first to answer.

"There are three of us—lost on the road. We had to leave our car a few miles back. We couldn't see to drive."

In another moment she felt light hands on her face. Then they dropped with practiced sureness to her own hands, felt the two men's arms, and fell away.

A LINGERING doubt that had alternated between fear and hope from the beginning in Sterling's mind was now dispelled. He had thought it just possible that the bird-crying had deceived him, that only they were blind. But by the way she had felt them, this woman also must be blind. Then why was she so calm? Had some explanation reached her, some explanation broadcast through the country, which they, isolated on the road, had missed?

"Do you know what's happened?" he asked directly.

Pause.

"Then—you don't know either?" was her answer.

There was a little tremor in her voice now, but it was gone when she spoke again. "Come with me," she said. "Follow close behind me. I know my way . . . Be careful here—there's a ditch." They felt a plank-walk underfoot, then heard a gate creak. "Come right through the gate . . . and right up the garden path . . . Two steps up, and this is the front door." She paused there. "You folks must be tired. How long have you been walking?"

"Since about six-thirty, I think," Sterling said, and introduced himself and the other two.

"I'm Mrs. Cranshaw," said the woman. "I live here with my husband. We're kind-a isolated. The nearest town is Mercer, about four miles up the road, and that's only a little place."

Sterling wondered what the woman was like. Her voice, the only thing he had to go by, gave no hint as to her age, but only that she hailed from the New England backwoods and that she appeared to be quite calm. This last, under the circumstances, seemed very strange indeed, and kept puzzling Sterling until the woman spoke again. Then the reason for it was clear.

"All this makes no difference to me," she said, as she opened the door. "I been stone blind for two years. I wouldn't even have known there was anything wrong if my husband didn't tell me. And even then I wasn't sure that it wasn't just something gone wrong with his eyes. But you folks are all blind too, so . . . Well, come in."

Gropingly they followed her inside. A clock was ticking somewhere near.

"To the right," she directed, and they passed through another door. "Now, if you'll just stand where you are, I'll lead each one of you to a chair . . . There we are. Make yourselves comfortable and rest awhile. You must-a had a pretty bad time."

Pretty bad!

Another voice, that of a man, rather gruff, and having in it something of the same nightmarish quality as that of Rogers, spoke from somewhere in the room.

"Then it *was* somebody, eh?"

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"Yes—I was sure I heard them coming."

"Well, you got better ears'n I got. I didn't hear nothing. And—they're all blind too, like me?"

"Yes, we're blind," Sterling assured him.

"That's my husband," said Mrs. Cranshaw, and there were more introductions.

"And now that you're here you better stay put." Mr. Cranshaw's voice rose. "I wouldn't send a dog out in that. Lord help us!"

"We're very much obliged indeed," Sterling said, turning in his direction. The weirdness of the meeting was very strong on him. Voices, touching hands—it was as if they were meeting fellow spirits, still earthbound and half material, floundering around in the first appalling strangeness of a universal sudden death. But the blind woman gave him comfort. She, at least, was all but normal. She was used to this blackness. He almost envied her.

"I reckon you could eat something," she said.

Eat? In this? Yet suddenly they realized they were starving. Margery offered help. The blind woman gently refused it. "I can manage," she explained. "I'm used to it. You ain't. I know where everything is."

She went out.

THEN both Sterling and Margery felt the rising of a queer taut aura in the room, akin to what they had felt in Rogers but more intense, with an uncomfortable added suggestion of a spirit which, though in mortal fear itself, could still gloat over universal fear. It was not long in declaring itself. The husband's voice struck harshly through the uneasy silence.

"If this don't end real soon," it said slowly, with grimly deliberate emphasis, "no soul on earth will be saved."

"That's possible," Sterling admitted, speaking as lightly as he could, though he felt his scalp crawling. "But must we talk about it?"

"They ain't nothing else to talk about," declared the man, and plunged into a jumble of apocalyptic biblical prophecies. They rolled from his invisible mouth with an unction that was grisly to hear. "The earth shall dissolve—"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, stop it!" Rogers cried suddenly, in the high, quivering voice of a man already at the gates of Hell. But Mr. Cranshaw did not even seem to hear.

"Let him be," Sterling muttered, groping for the airman's ear. "Pay no attention to him, or you may make him worse . . . I wish his wife would come back," he whispered to Margery, who had also felt her way to Rogers' chair. "She seems pretty sound. She may be able to handle him."

A faint clatter of cups—then sure footsteps drew near, entered and crossed the room.

"That'll do now, Jim, please," came Mrs. Cranshaw's quiet but firm voice. "I'm sure you're worrying our guests. We can't all be students of Holy Script, you know . . . I made tea, 'cos it wouldn't take so long to make and I figured you folks was hungry. Cream and sugar, Miss Doran? I better put it in for you."

"Cream, please, but no sugar."

The incredible incongruity of it all!

"Sugar, Mr. Sterling?"

"One and a half, please. I'm afraid we're giving you a lot of trouble."

"No trouble," she assured him. She felt for his hand and put it around the handle of the teacup. "Mr. Rogers, sugar?"

Then she set a plate of sandwiches on the floor beside each chair.

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It was a strange and rather difficult meal; but at least Mr. Cranshaw's biblical prophecies had ceased. It was already evident that Mrs. Cranshaw's was the stronger mind of the two.

"It's too bad we ain't got no phone here," she said presently. "This is one time we could sure have used it. 'Cos they're bound to know something in Mercer, don't you reckon?"

"Well, yes—at least, that's what we thought," said Sterling.

"That's why we're rather anxious to get there. You see, as long as you have a road under your feet, it isn't so hard to find your way—once you get used to it, I mean. We ought to be able to make it in a couple of hours, don't you think?"

"Oh, but you ain't going tonight. You're all tired out, and I won't let you."

THE clock struck ten, and Mrs. Cranshaw began talking of sleeping arrangements. It was only with difficulty that they managed to dissuade her from giving up her own room to Margery and the guest room to the two men. Eventually Margery took the guest room and Sterling and Rogers the sitting-room, one in an easy chair and the other on the couch.

They had been three hours on the road. The world might be coming to an end, as Mr. Cranshaw so luridly insisted, but tired bodies still demanded sleep.

Rogers threw himself down on the couch, tossed around for a minute or two, then began to talk.

"I'm sorry, Noel," he said rather unsteadily, "for being so—jumpy. Nerves in pretty bad shape, I'm afraid."

"This is enough to make anybody jumpy," the artist said soothingly. "But it can't go on forever. We just got to keep a grip on ourselves while it lasts."

Pretty dangerous ground. It brought back his own loathsome dream of an Earth perpetually dark and dead—or peopled with livid reptilian blind things. Did the same dread haunt the airman's mind?

"Get a grip on myself?" Rogers answered, his voice beginning to rise again. "Haven't I been trying all the time? And it's no use, I tell you. How the devil you can stand it . . . I tell you it's driving me crazy! And that's because, if you want to know the truth," he went on in a sudden rush of words, as if some mental sluice-gate had burst open, "I'm nothing but a washout. I've always been a washout, and I've always known it, too. And now I just can't hide it any more, I guess. I'm no good to Margery or to anybody else. I wish I had crashed and ended it long ago. But no such luck. I had to go on and be a hero. A hero! Bah! If they only knew the truth, those fools of newspaper writers . . . Yes, and don't think I haven't wanted to shout it from the house-tops, tell the whole silly world about it. Tell them all, and then crash!" His voice broke. "It would have saved —some people—a lot of—"

"Now, listen," Sterling interrupted, horrified at that bitter outburst. "You just got to pull yourself together."

"It's easy enough to say."

"I'm not finding it so easy."

"Sorry," Rogers said heavily.

"I'm trying to look at it this way," Sterling persisted, doggedly but without much hope. "We've all gone blind for the time being, like Mrs. Cranshaw. All right, let's be like her and not try to look ahead at all. Take things as they come. We're all right so far. We found a place to stay and food, and we're going to get a night's sleep. You're bound to feel better in the morning."

"If only this maniac would stop spouting those texts of his—"

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"I know. It *is* unnerving. I've always hated that kind of stuff myself. It's really a mental disease, worse than actual insanity sometimes. It's the sort of thing misfits and failures go in for. It comforts them to think that some day everybody who isn't just like themselves is going to get it—from some kind of private god who'll pay off their envious scores for them, give the whole world hell for not taking enough notice of them. And they call themselves the *meek*, who shall inherit the earth! Of all the crazy notions! . . . Why, Margery!"

"I CAME in to say good-night—and I couldn't help hearing what you said." She sat down on the edge of the couch beside the airman. "Come over here, Noel," she went on. "I'm going to try and say something to you both, and we don't want to disturb the Cranshaws." She waited for Sterling to join them, then began, "I—I don't usually talk about these things. I mean, I never did, as a matter of fact—but that doesn't mean I never thought about them. And—well, I was just wondering, don't you think maybe there's a sort of—crazy inverted sense in what Mr. Cranshaw's been raving about?"

"Good Lord, you don't mean . . ."

"This darkness. He thinks it's the work of God, of some vengeful, spiteful Old Testament god, the same as floods and droughts and plagues, and terrible storms at sea, and—oh, everything that goes wrong in the world. But surely God, the God we understand, doesn't will those things."

She paused, began half-ashamedly to explain once more that she wasn't very good at that kind of talk. Sterling knew what embarrassed her. It embarrassed him just as badly. In those days only paid preachers were supposed to talk about God.

"But when things get beyond us," she stammered on, "what can we do but . . . turn to God, and think about Him? And I can't help but believe there must be a reason for everything that happens. There must be a reason for this. Oh, I don't mean a scientific reason. That would only be a label. People have an idea that when they've labeled something they've explained it. Science may be able to explain *how* this darkness came, but it can't explain *why*. Don't you see what I mean? God could never have made this horror. But somebody must have made it. And—I think we made it ourselves. Aren't we all parts of some huge Whole? And if one part goes wrong, won't that upset the Whole? Was Moses just talking nonsense when he warned the Israelites that if they disobeyed God's laws, the laws of the Whole, everything around them would spoil—crops, cattle, and even the climate? Or was he saying something that our science is just beginning to guess at now? . . . Mr. Cranshaw says this darkness is the work of God. I think we brought it on ourselves—actually *wished* it on ourselves, until God was forced to do it. Not so much to punish us, because God is not vindictive, but to teach us a lesson."

"You mean that He will turn evil into good?" Sterling asked.

"Yes. Or at least, that's what I think. I mean, if this darkness is everywhere—all over the world—won't it stop things?"

"Stop things? It must have stopped *everything*," Sterling answered. "But—"

"So that everybody will have to sit still, as we're doing now—and think! Oh, I know it's going to mean death for some, maybe even for us—but that's a lot better than things would have been if the world had gone on as

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it was . . . God doesn't punish and destroy. I *won't* believe it. He tries to save us all the time—from ourselves."

Well, if that was her faith, Sterling thought, it was a lot pleasanter to hear than Mr. Cranshaw's rantings. It seemed to help even Rogers—though perhaps what really calmed him was her nearness.

"So—I can't lose hope. We mustn't lose hope. And now," she finished. "I think we'd all better get some sleep. Good-night."

IT WAS some time before Sterling could get to sleep. Margery's words kept running through his brain. She might be right. Even if it was, as Cranshaw insisted, that God's own hand had spread this darkness, couldn't it be, after all, a surgeon's merciful hand? Even if it did mean death for many, it surely couldn't equal the holocaust of another war. Why, it could hardly equal the daily slaughter on the highways.

If only it would, as Margery said, make the world sit back and think!

He heard the clock strike one. After that he drifted off into a heavy sleep, and slept right through until seven-thirty when he woke up, feeling chilled, to a sound of steady rain.

He heard the clock's single stroke, but as that didn't mean anything insofar as telling him the time, he lay waiting in the blackness for it to strike the next hour. At last it came. Eight o'clock—and the dark as deep as ever. He had faintly hoped . . . but no use thinking of that now. He had to face the first full "day" of it, and that was daunting.

Margery was already in the kitchen with Mrs. Cranshaw, trying to learn. It was not easy; and presently the two women ran into a new and puzzling difficulty, the same thing Sterling had discovered when he had struck a match on the road and felt no warmth from it until it had burned him—a thing Mrs. Cranshaw would have discovered herself when boiling the kettle the night before, if it had not been boiling already on the stove, still alight from an afternoon's baking.

She usually cooked on an oil stove, finding it easier than the range. Everything in her kitchen had its own place, and this "morning" she went unerringly as usual to the matches, and lit the stove. Again as usual, she felt for the increasing heat that would tell her the wicks were burning, but no heat at all came out of the burner-door. She struck another match and tried again, but still the wicks didn't seem to catch. Out of oil? She jogged the little fuel tank, and the gurgling noise told her it was half full. Then, as if still not convinced, she dropped her hand on the stove-top—and snatched it away with a cry. The stove was burning after all. Bending over it again, she felt the uprush of flame-heated air and fumes.

But again the full significance of the thing was missed, as Sterling had missed it the day before. Finding that the stove was alight after all, Mrs. Cranshaw just went ahead with her breakfast preparations, the strangeness of her failure to feel any heat radiation through the burner-doors dropping to the back of her mind.

AS SHE worked, she and Margery talked, and it wasn't long before the blind woman was telling something of her lonely life there with her husband. Mr. Cranshaw, it came out, was a war veteran, who had been wounded and gassed, and invalided with a pension that was just enough to keep the two of them alive. Living was cheap

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there on the edge of everything, but it was no good for Jim. Except for pottering around the garden, the man had nothing to do—no other men to talk to—and when he should have gone out and tried to meet people, he preferred to sit with his Bible, spending more time over it than she altogether liked. It had seemed to grow on him—though she had never realized how far gone he was on it until the Darkness came.

"I'm really anxious about him. I wish there was some way of taking his mind off of it. I can usually stop him talking about it, but I can't stop him thinking."

"I'll do all I can to help," Margery said gently. "And I'm sure Mr. Sterling will too when I tell him."

She told Sterling right after breakfast, and he felt ashamed of his outburst of the night before. He would have to find some way of making it up to the poor man. And see that Rogers understood. This morning the airman seemed to have sunk into a lethargic dullness that made Sterling more anxious than ever for his sanity.

"We'll have to get to the village as soon as we can," he told himself. "Action is the only thing for him. But that means leaving Mrs. Cranshaw with a man who's not far from a religious maniac—and after Margery promised to help her with him too. What am I going to do?"

The rain settled that question. During breakfast—a groping repetition of the scratch meal of the night before—it increased to a lashing roar on the roof, a downpour into which Mrs. Cranshaw refused point-blank to let them venture.

"If you must go," she said when Sterling tried to insist, "you can at least wait till the rain stops. But there's no reason for you to go at all. I—we're very glad to have you."

None of them, of course, foresaw what was still to come. How could they have foreseen?

It was not until some time later, when the increasing cold prompted them to light a fire in the sitting-room fireplace, that the terrible truth began to dawn on them. Painfully, they finally puzzled it out, from facts that could not be gainsaid. The fire was almost useless. It radiated no heat whatever into the room, and what little air its flames directly warmed was wasted up the chimney. And outside, as they could tell by feeling the panes of the now tightly closed windows, the temperature sank and sank.

In the end they had to move to the kitchen and the oil-stove. That made for an enervating stuffiness, and periodically they had to open the door to let in some fresh air. But at least the air that passed again and again through the burner-tubes was warmed thereby.

About noon the beat of the rain softened to a strange pattering. After listening awhile, Sterling opened a window in the front part of the house in puzzled curiosity—and felt cold snowflakes drifting against his face and hands. Snow, in early summer!

A tiny, temperate oasis in the absolute zero-cold of Space, the Earth was beginning to cool.

Slow was that cooling, by scientific standards. From sixty Fahrenheit, roughly the mean temperature of the day before, to the minus two hundred and seventy-three Centigrade of absolute zero is a long long way to go. On the first full "day" of the Darkness the mercury went down but a few degrees below freezing-point—a very short distance considering how much lower it could still go, but not very far above the limit of that narrow band of temperatures outside which no warm-blooded life can exist.

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DURING lunch, with many apologies, strangely out of place, Mrs. Cranshaw voiced a doubt that had been filtering into everybody's mind. Would there be enough food in the house? . . . She then took an inventory. There might be enough to last the five of them, on rations, for two more days.

Fiercely Sterling blamed himself. So this was his leadership—battening on a disabled ex-soldier and his blind wife, eating them out of their own house! He should have tried to make Mercer last night, or even this morning, rain or no rain. It was too late to think of their going there now. He couldn't drag Margery out into that snowstorm, with the temperature dropping every minute. But he could try to get there by himself and bring back food—*if the village had any food to spare.*

"I'll go with you," said Mr. Cranshaw. "There's quite a lot of side-roads on the way and you might get mixed up and never get there by yourself."

They started at about two in the afternoon. Already they found the snow muffling their footsteps on the garden path, and the air was like midwinter, with a rising wind. The snowflakes were no longer big and soft and pattering, but small and dry and powdery. The air hurt the throat.

Within twenty minutes they knew they were off the road. The piling snowdrifts gave their feet no guidance. Cranshaw's gassed throat and lungs were already paining him. It was hopeless to attempt to reach the village. It was touch-and-go, Sterling realized with a cold around his heart worse than that on his face, whether they would ever get back to the house.

"We'd better feel our way back by our footprints," he said.

They would have to be quick. Their tracks were already starting to fill.

"My God!" Cranshaw wheezed a little later. "I'm choking!"

Sterling stopped, got his own shortening breath, and gave a long shout. Perhaps Mrs. Cranshaw's super-sensitive ears might hear him. If only she could, and would ring a bell . . . But no answer came. Half dragging Cranshaw, he struggled on, shouting at intervals. Finally he heard the beating of a gong, but by the time he reached the front door, Cranshaw was unconscious.

"I don't think we got more than a mile, if that," Sterling gasped out when the two had been helped inside. "Snow's getting thicker all the time, and the cold's—awful."

By then it was like an Arctic blizzard, and on the inside surface of the window the condensed moisture had become a thick film of ice.

As the clock signaled the slow passage of the hours, a nagging ache of cold began to attack their extremities. There was nothing they could do but wrap themselves in blankets and sit around the oil-stove in the kitchen, drinking hot tea whenever they felt the need of it. Nobody seemed to want to talk. Even Margery's nerves began to tauten.

In the relative warmth of the kitchen, Cranshaw had quickly recovered; but he had become subdued now. The End of the World was getting too close to talk about it.

All night the oil-stove burned on, and all night they sat huddled around it, uncomfortably dozing, miserably waking up, straining their useless eyes for light—light—light—the light they were longing for but which they feared they would never see again.

And the next day, as Sterling had dreaded from the first, poor Rogers cracked.

ALL morning, except for brief excursions into other parts of the

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house, none of them had stirred from the kitchen. The hours had crawled intolerably. The cold had stiffened and stiffened, inexorably, like a slowly closing vice. Again no one had felt like talking.

Until late in the "afternoon," Cranshaw suddenly threw off the lethargy that had held him ever since Sterling had dragged him back from sure death. And that was the last straw.

Without warning or preamble, he snatched from the past the mantle of Moses, to confront the Pharaohs of the modern world with wild demands and accusations—and even wilder threats. Despots, financiers, and politicians; pharisee-priests of religion, moloch-priests of trade and commerce, jazz-mad spirit of amusement and pastime, sex-obsessed purveyors of mass-produced fiction and films—he arrayed and arraigned them all before him, and stormed at them as if they were really in the room and himself the Mouthpiece of the Lord. Plague by plague he took them through the long-forgotten horrors that had come to ancient Egypt—likening them, with all the unanswerable plausibility of the religiously unhinged, to the visitations of the war and the post-war years. The blood-stained Nile became the waters of a flooded Flanders, shell-churned to mingled mud and blood and flesh. The Murrain and the Plague of Boils were but the prophetic "type" of the post-war scourge that the doctors had labeled "influenza" because they had no idea what it really was. But Cranshaw knew. It was the Hand of an outraged Jehovah . . . And the Locusts? Did not a cloud of them ravage all Africa only a few years ago? And now here was the Darkness, the Ninth Plague. Three days and three nights the Egyptians had sat cowering, each in his own house, as they themselves were sitting now, in a thick blackness that had mantled all the land. But this time it would last three years.

"I have appointed unto you a day for a year!" he shouted. "Will you let my people go?"

He paused, as if expecting the envisioned Pharaohs to answer; then the tirade went sweeping on.

"Then shall the Last Plague follow, one with this. The Firstborn? More than the firstborn—that was but a shadow of the Wrath to come. All flesh! You will not let my people go. My people will not go. They are no longer my people. Divorced, outcast, unworthy, to be purged from the earth they have despoiled! Not by fervent heat, but by freezing cold—cold—cold. The world shall be without form and void, as it was in the Beginning, and Darkness shall cover its winding-sheet of ice—"

It was then that Rogers, snarling like an infuriated animal, sprang at the man.

IN THAT darkness the horror of that melee was intensified a hundredfold. A wild trampling, hands gripping and tearing, feet stamping and twisting, body thudding against body in an unseen tangle of chairs. Crockery crashing and crunching; and, ghastliest of all, the sobbing beast-like mouth-noises of the maddened Rogers, the gasping, truncated denunciations of his victim, and the cries of the two women.

Appalled, Sterling leapt into the midst of it. The stove! Good God, the oil-stove! If they knocked that over . . .

"Stop! . . . Where are you, Alan?—For Heaven's sake, Margery, keep clear!—Damn you, Alan, stop that, or you'll set the place on fire!"

Grimly he felt for him, by the sound of his breathing and the noise of the

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fight. At last he found a convulsively writhing leg, was kicked away, crawled doggedly back again, found the two locked together, Rogers on top, throttling the other.

Sterling got his fingers around the airman's throat, braced himself, and dragged him up and back. Continuing to drag him away, he shouted, "Margery! Here he is—I got him! Maybe you can quiet him—"

But Rogers, like the wild beast he had become, broke the grip with a sudden twist of his body and went plunging through the door.

They heard him floundering in the sitting-room, bumping into furniture in his rush to reach the front door. Filled with foreboding fear for him, they groped after him, only to hear the front door open and shut again with a bang a moment later. A blast of air and snow, like fire and ice, smote their faces. Margery rushed to the door, opened it again, and took one stumbling step down into the powdery waist-high drift. It was like stepping into a bath of boiling water.

"Alan! Alan!" she cried out. "Come back!"

The hiss of the sandy snow-crystals, eddying on the moaning blizzard-wind, was her only answer.

No more snow was falling. The cold had squeezed the air dry by now, to the razor-keen dryness of intensest frost.

It was Sterling who pulled Margery back, already drowsy from that awful cold, and tried to take her place. But an instant's thought, even as he plunged down the path, told him how futile it was to try and follow the airman. In that blind dark he had no idea where to look for him. Already his footprints were lost. To stay out there looking for him would only mean his own useless death—leaving two women behind with a religious maniac.

Rogers had made his choice, he had found a way out, with perhaps a hint of redeeming honor, the choice of a man who could no longer live with himself, could not bear the strain of waiting any longer for death . . .

But was that all? Could not the idea have flashed into his mind, in one last moment of blinding sanity, that his going would mean more food for those who remained?

"God rest him," Sterling muttered, and turned back toward the door. Just then, with a strange faintness, he heard the women calling him. "All right," he called back, and plunged vaguely in the direction of their voices. A hand grabbed his arm.

"Get him inside and shut the door, or the whole house'll freeze," he heard Mrs. Cranshaw say. He felt himself drawn in, heard the door slam shut behind him. Dizzily and stumbling clumsily over his feet, which had somehow become two blocks of ice and lead, he spread out his arms to feel the wall. His right hand must have touched it, for he felt the jar of it in his shoulder, but there was no sensation in his fingers. He swayed. He was collapsing, but could not do anything to save himself. He fell against Mrs. Cranshaw. Still dimly conscious, he heard her call to Margery to help her with him.

Sterling's last thought before he fainted away was that Rogers must already be dead, or lying in the brief coma that leads to death, out there in that awful stinging snow. Well, it would not be long before they followed him. The whole world must be dying. Could Cranshaw be right after all, and Margery wrong? Had humanity—failed? Was all life to be frozen off the earth, and the planet to lie fallow until the ageless powers of Nature could create a new and better life?

The whole grim picture went through

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his failing brain in one last blaze of lightning-like thought—then the Darkness flowed in on him and engulfed him.

STERLING woke up to such pain as he had never dreamed of before. His whole body seemed to be afire, tortured by a thousand pinchers, shot through with a million needles. If this was the Resurrection . . .

"He's coming to," said a voice—Margery's voice, a sudden gladness in it stepping on the heels of long anxiety.

"Margery," he mumbled thickly; and then, "What happened?"

"Frost-bite or something. You passed right out. We've been rubbing you for over an hour. Thought you'd never . . . come back. Thank God you did . . . But oh! poor Alan . . ."

Sterling tried to console her. "It must have been very quick. Just like falling asleep. It's all over for him now. We still got to face things. Why did you bring me back?"

He was still not much more than half conscious, or he would never have asked such a question. The moment it was out he was ashamed of it.

"Because—because we mustn't let go, any of us. We *mustn't!* If we're to die, we'll die. But we mustn't die before we're—called."

"Here's the tea," said Mrs. Cranshaw, practical as always.

He swallowed a mouthful, then asked, "Where's Mr. Cranshaw?"

"Here," came a broken voice. "Would it be any use to ask you to forgive me?"

"Forgive you?"

"I killed him. I drove him to it. I see that now. And it wasn't as if Mary didn't warn me. I'm the same as a murderer." His voice rose, he began hysterically to curse himself. "Damned," he sobbed out at the finish, "that's what I am—damned for all Eternity."

Sterling sank back helplessly, soul-weary of it all. He could not cope with much more of that.

"No," said Margery with quiet earnestness. "God isn't that kind. He doesn't damn us, He sees us through. He'll see us through now, whether we live or die. I think . . . I think we ought to . . ." Her words trailed away into a strange little taut silence. Then, almost in a whisper, uncontrollably trembling, she spoke two hesitating words—and the tension eased.

"Our Father," she began, "Which art . . ."

Crouched there around the burning but invisible stove, in the utter blackness of the little kitchen, the four of them repeated the ancient prayer. Few of its words were really in keeping with their desperate plight, but it was the prayer itself, with its associations, that helped them.

There followed a quiet, filled with a deep and calming peace which none of them dared to break. The Cranshaws sat hand in hand, as if waiting. Sterling lay back in his tight-wrapped blanket, beyond all reach of thought, hardly knowing even that Margery had crept into the roomy chair beside him. She lay with her head down on his chest, spent utterly with reaction. There was no need for her to struggle any more, no need to spend her spirit to help and uphold poor Alan any more—he was in Other hands now. And she wanted to rest. Oh, how she wanted to rest!

Time was not. Their bodies could not have been far from that trance-inertia which is always the herald of death by cold; but they did not sleep. Sterling knew that he was wakeful as never before—waiting, as the Cranshaws waited, as that night all Creation must have waited.

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THE clock in the sitting-room struck three. It broke the spell. Margery heard it and stirred.

"Are you awake?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"How long now, I wonder? I can hardly feel anything at all. Just . . . a delicious tiredness."

Instinctively, but very slowly, for his arms and legs would hardly obey him, he got one arm out of the blanket and put it around her shoulders.

"Sleep, then Margery," he murmured, only dimly aware of what he said. "We'll go together."

With a contented little sigh she was still.

He lay and wondered at himself, wondering if he was dreaming. Surely, here in the very presence of death, this couldn't really be?

Margery was whispering again. "I'm sure Alan . . . understands . . . now."

Blindly he stared over her shoulder into the dark. Rogers' words of the first night, before Margery had come in, had come back to him. He had the key to them now. Rogers had understood *then*.

It seemed that this Darkness had the power to clear that other darkness that was in men's minds. All, apparently, for nothing. But the thought had little or no poignancy now. That death should be universal somehow made it seem less tragic. It is those who are left behind who feel death's tragedy. Now no one was to remain behind. All the world was going on the same journey.

Margery was very still now. Had she gone already? The thought swept away his dim philosophy like cloud-wrack. Margery! Dead?

His arm tightened about her as if to drag her back, hold her back.

She stirred. She raised her head a little. Her lips lightly touched his cheek, then found his own.

Good-bye.

He himself must be getting near the end, for he was beginning to see visions. A little halo of faintest purple, hovering just over Margery's head. For a long time he watched it, convinced that when it sank down onto her, into her, she would die. It had come to take her. With all the vital power that was left to him he willed it not to move.

It obeyed. Presently he realized that it was brightening gradually to a dim and ghostly green. Around it the vague outline of some sort of framing began to appear. Near it, like some occult symbol, was a clouded apparition like a hand, hanging loosely downward. After a while he could make out the thumb and fingers. What did it mean?

A golden glow had begun to flicker about the brightening green halo-ring. Sterling shut his eyes, held them shut for a whole minute, then opened them again.

"Margery! *Margery!*"

"Is it . . . time?" she answered in a sleep-drugged murmur.

"Light! Margery—*Light!*"

For the halo was one of the oil-stove circular burners, and its framing was the mica-windowed door. And the hand was the left hand of Mr. Cranshaw, hanging down loosely from the arm of his chair.

At the sound of Sterling's shout, it clenched convulsively, then lifted to the chair-arm and gripped it as its owner bent forward, blinking amazedly at the returning light.

At last, from the heavily frosted window, they looked out on a world of dawning gray, and, after an age of waiting, the Sun rose, bright and clear and *warm*, over a limitless waste of snow.

THE END

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On the moon was a mechanism that had to be smashed; and Earth had the gun. But there had to be someone to find the range!

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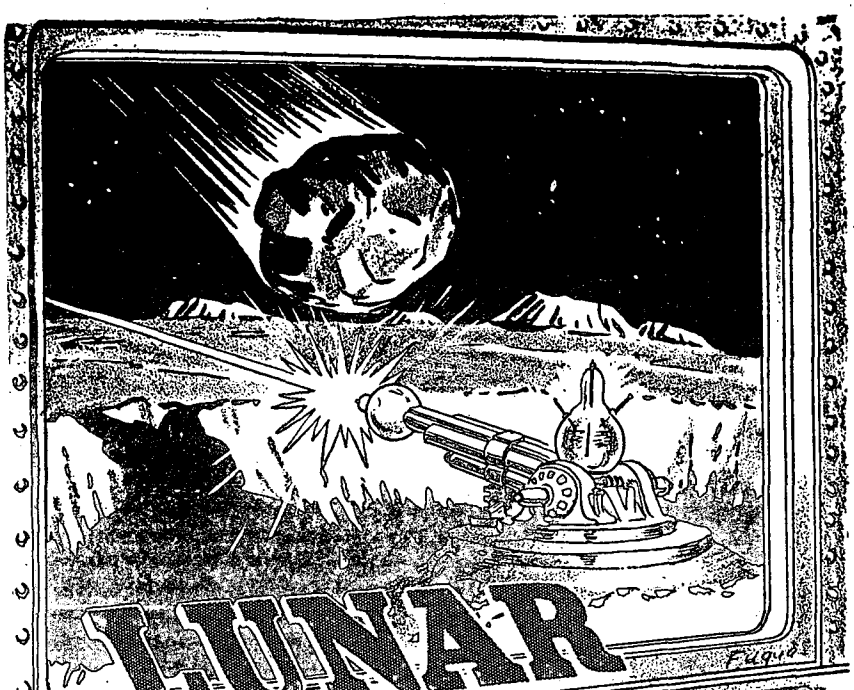

LUNAR VENGEANCE

By **THORNTON AYRE**

NEW YORK Airport Number 1 was filled to capacity. Cars were jammed in the tens of thousands side by side; men, women and children were sitting or standing on their roofs. Some had field glasses, others had resorted to twenty-cent spy glasses. There were television cameras by the dozen, radio commentators and newsreel men.

New York had gone mad. The most thrilling of days had arrived. The first flight to the moon was about to begin!

In the center of this cyclone of surging humanity, in an area kept clear by the struggles of police officers and militia, stood the rocket ship—devised and invented by Hartley Dean. Right now he stood shaking hands with Brice Mynak, the toughest stratosphere aviator the World State Air Force had yet produced, indeed about the only man deemed fit enough by medical science to make this daring leap into infinity.

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Hartley Dean was massive, big shouldered, strong-faced, with a wide intelligent forehead and deep gray eyes. He was definitely one of the finest astrophysicists science had yet produced. . . . Brice Mynak on the other hand was smallish, olive-skinned, with a hint of his revered Egyptian heritage about his features.

"Good luck!" Hart breathed, gripping the slender, steel-strong hand. "You're probably the pioneer of a space empire, and don't go forgetting it! Everybody, the world over, is expecting big things."

"I know," Brice Mynak said simply. "And they'll get them!" he added—then he climbed through the airlock and closed it.

There was a long, tense pause. Civic authorities, engineers, the mass of the people, Hartley Dean in particular—they all waited. Beside Hart, Beryl Mason was standing tensely, her dark eyes fixed on the machine. Further away still was her father, biting his lip steadily.

"We've waited a long time for this, Hart," the girl whispered.

"Yes." His mind flashed back over the years he had spent with the girl and her father working out the intricacies of space travel in the great Mason Aircraft Corporation laboratories. And now—

Suddenly the rocket ship moved. There was a flash of flame from the gleaming exhaust tubes, a backdraft of scorching air that sent the people pressing backwards with arms flung over their faces. Hart and the girl turned away quickly. . . .

Then with cyclonic force the machine swept from level keel over the heads of the people, over the giant buildings, roared with a meteoric scream into the calm morning sky—turned—went upwards—. Higher — higher, watched now by millions of eager eyes. It became a speck, left a trail of condensation . . . and was gone!

Din exploded everywhere. Sirens blew, people yelled, automobile horns shrieked. Babel rolled back and forth and rebounded in the crowd. Hart stood grinning and frowning by turns—triumphant as an engineer; anxious as a man.

"He *must* make it, Berry," he breathed, clutching the girl to him. "He must! It's man's greatest progressive leap ever!"

SIX hours later came the stunning news. It jolted the world from equator to arctic, suddenly rendered needless the observation of the rocket by trained armies of astronomers. Those other armies, the radio technicians in touch with Brice Mynak, realized before anybody how hopes had been smashed. They were the first to get Mynak's single message—a forlorn, desperate cry—

"I can't stand it! It's breaking me! I can't—!"

That was all! But observers in the moonward hemisphere reported that a meteor had been seen. Falling to earth. Location? Unknown as yet. . . .

In the big central-operations office of the Mason Corporation, Hart was gray with worry, Beryl and her father at his side just as anxious as he was. Their attention was glued to the world-reports being flashed to them. . . . And so at last their worst fears were confirmed.

The rocket ship had crashed! Had come down in a blaze of unholy glory somewhere in the Sahara desert, probably near the ruins of the half excavated city of Tri-Konam. Already the emergency squads were flying to the scene of the disaster.

"My God!" Hart whispered, staring

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in stunned horror in front of him. "My God—it failed!"

"But how the devil could it?" Mason demanded. He was a realist, mature, and a keen business man. "We've checked everything—gravity strain, accelerative fields, radiation— And there was plenty of fuel!" He frowned puzzledly. "I didn't get what Brice meant by that one radio message. *What* was breaking him, anyway—?"

Hart jerked out of his trance and cut the older man short.

"What the blazes are we doing standing here, anyway? We've got to get out to that fallen ship as fast as we can. Come on!"

An express airplane was ready for the three of them in a few minutes. With Hart at the controls it streaked like lightning from the city, maintained its stratosphere height and eight-hundred mile an hour speed for the whole eastward journey.

Beryl kept a check on the radio so they could make their course. Gradually they turned toward Egypt. Here it was late afternoon. Desert, the eternal Sahara, spread below them, its surface marred only by the Sphinx and Pyramids and the partly completed restoration of the recently discovered city of Tri-Konam.

But the attention of the three was mainly focused upon a swarming mass of men and sand-tractors gathered around a still smoking object in the sand. Hart dropped the 'plane swiftly, put out the sand-skids, then taxied forward to the site of operations.

Jumping out, he hurried over to Freeman, the chief engineer in charge of excavating Tri-Konam.

"What happened?" Hart demanded.

Freeman's sun-dried face was grim. "Guess this is all that's left of that rocket ship, Mr. Dean. It landed on its emergency underjets so it didn't actually crash: this heat was generated in the atmosphere fall. We managed to get Brice Mynak out before he burned but— Well, he's in a gosh-awful mess."

"Take me to him!" Hart's voice was impatient with worry.

THE engineer led the way across the sand to where Brice Mynak lay under a sunshield, stretched out flat, badly blackened on the face and hands. Healing ointment gleamed on his skin. His breathing came and went in shallow gasps.

"Take it easy," said the medico in the sun-suit attending him. "He's in mighty poor shape."

Hart nodded and took the aviator by the shoulder.

"Brice, what happened? Tell me! Brice!"

Brice opened his eyes at that and Hart felt a strong inclination to recoil. The look in those eyes was unnerving, horrible. It was the blank, ghastly stare of a man who has had reason blasted. Certainly there was no spark of recognition in the dead orbs.

"No use, I'm afraid," the medico sighed. "He's insane. He says queer things at times — impossible things about chariots of fire. Delusions, obviously."

Hart looked at Beryl and her father sharply, then again tried with Brice.

"Brice! It's me, old man—Hart Dean. You know me? Your pal?"

Brice tossed uneasily as though something had indeed stirred his outraged brain. Then he lay flat again and stared blindly up at the canvas sunshield.

"Chariots," he whispered, through cracked lips. "Chariots of fire—in the sky—dropping to the city—! They're falling!" He breathed rapidly. "Must load the towers!" he panted. "Must load them quickly . . ."

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He stopped suddenly to grip Hart's wrist with a hot hand. The blank face turned to stare at him.

"They must be loaded," he whispered, almost inaudibly. "The square towers—" Then suddenly he shuddered, relaxed.

Beryl turned away sharply from that sudden death, face averted. The medico pulled the dust sheet slowly over the stricken visage.

"But—but *what* killed him?" Hart demanded, clenching his fists. "Surely you've some idea, doc?"

He shugged. "Might have been one of a number of things. Too rapid a speed in space; sudden clot on the brain causing insanity—. Poor devil! He died crazy all right . . ."

Hart looked around on the wastes of sand; the ruins of the half excavated city. Thoughts were twisting in his keen mind—odd thoughts.

"I suppose it was chance that he landed here," he muttered. "The Earth would have rotated far enough from New York, his initial starting point, to cause it. Yet somehow, because he was of Egyptian descent . . ."

"What the devil does that matter?" Mason asked bitterly. "The whole thing is a fizzle, and one of the best aviators in the world is dead. And I'm a cool two million out of pocket. I guess we'd better see what the ship will fetch as scrap."

THE three of them turned to the site of operations again. With something of an effort, still dazed by the ruin of his plans, Hart made an examination—but not with the ruthless business eye of Mason. His aims were scientific, as usual.

The curious thing was that there was nothing amiss with the ship, except its blackened exterior. The instruments were okay, the fuel ample. Nothing whatever should have stopped Brice Mynak going right ahead to the Moon. Yet, out in space, an unknown power had blasted every sane thought out of him.

"Just what do we do?" Mason asked sharply, when the examination was over and they were having tea in the mobile canteen. "As a business man this is a serious matter for me. It throws my financial foresight into disrepute; and it clouds your profession, Hart, as a first class engineer."

"Those are side issues," Hart grunted, staring moodily at the flaming sunset. "I'm trying to figure out Brice's dying words— That stuff about loading square towers. . . ."

He broke off and Beryl and her father saw that he was looking at the ruins of Tri-Konam against the lurid sky, ruins quite close to the ageless Pyramids, ruins sprouting towers, minarets, and domes. . . .

"I suppose," he finished slowly, "he couldn't have meant *those* towers?"

"Not very likely, is it?" Mason asked bluntly. "Doc Andrews, the archaeologist, says those are only some sort of ventilation shafts. Know better when the excavations are finished."

"Queer to have ventilation shafts to a city that once stood above ground," Hart reflected, still gazing.

To his imagination, as the night deepened, they looked—those towers—like four mammoth guns pointing skywards. But whoever heard of a gun being square? Besides, hadn't the excavators discovered that each tower was set in a solid block of stone? Guns!

Hart laughed ruefully, looked beyond the Pyramids to the eastern horizon. The moon, waning to her last quarter, was just poking into the darkened sky. Brice Mynak had of course taken off at full moon to secure full visibility.

"Looks very inscrutable, sailing

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there, doesn't it?" Beryl sighed, watching it with chin on hand. "Just as though it feels proud of having beaten us miserable little humans!"

"But between us and it there is the unknown—something which smashed Brice!" Hart's jaws set tightly; then he clenched his big fists and looked towards the dim bulk of the battered space ship. Fiercely he went on, "But Brice told us *something*—and if I spend the rest of my life on the job I'm going to find out what he meant! We're going to build another space ship—or at least remodel this one—and I'm going to drive it!"

Mason and the girl stared at him in surprise.

"But, Hart," the girl said anxiously, "your medical report shows you are not capable of standing it! You've never been a stratosphere man and—"

"Be damned to that!" he interrupted brusquely. "My best friend is dead, and your father's and my reputations are at stake. I'm going to alter all that! Tomorrow we start back for New York and begin all over again. No mystery in space is going to balk this effort to make the Moon the first stop in a regular space line."

CHAPTER II

Sahara Secret

FIRED with new enthusiasm Hart cracked the whip to full effect in the Mason workshops and the salvaged space machine was brought back to its original glory—a job that took nearly two months of ceaseless work.

In this time the unhappy death of Brice Mynak and the fiasco of the first lunar effort had died from public memory—and this time Hart killed all publicity about his intentions. He had gotten through the first debacle by the skin of his teeth: a second one might have grave commercial and professional repercussions.

So when at last the machine was ready it was placed in the private testing yard of the Mason works. The day set for departure grew nearer: each night brought a waxing Moon in the early autumn sky. And with it Beryl Mason became increasingly anxious.

"Look, Hart, does it really matter?" she asked him, as he finished his check up of details on the night before he was due to depart at 10:00 a. m. next day. "I mean why not experiment a little more and maybe you'll find what really drove Brice insane. There was perhaps some error which—"

"Listen, sweet, there was no error!" He caught her slender arms gently, looked into her strained face. "Whatever trouble there is in space I'm going to locate—and it *is* there and no place else. What's more, I'll reach the Moon! I have everything here—radio, provisions, space suits, weapons— What's the matter?" he broke off, as she remained silent.

"Nothing," she said very quietly, then detaching herself from his grip she walked away across the tarmac without another word. He wondered if his adamancy had offended her. . . .

Next morning he was quite sure she'd taken umbrage for she did not even turn up with her father to see him make his lonely departure.

"I don't know where she is," Mason replied anxiously, as Hart questioned him. "She went off somewheres last night after seeing you. I guess she doesn't like you risking your life, Hart, and I feel the same way about it. However," he shrugged, "we can't make headway without risk. So there it is."

He held out his hand and Hart gripped it firmly. There was a rather woeful smile about his lips.

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"Tell Berry I'll come back a hero," he said briefly; then went inside the ship and closed the airlock.

HE SAT before the control board he knew so well, hesitated for a moment, then switched on the power to the firing cylinders. Instantly the machine jolted under him, flung him flat against the springs of his chair. His breath was forced out of him in a long gasp: little drops of blood trickled from his nose. For a second or two he sat in gasping anguish as the ship hurtled outwards, upwards, and then climbed with dizzying speed.

Faster he went, cleaving through the stratosphere, the Heaviside Layer. Temperatures outside switched amazingly but in the insulated ship he felt no variations— Then a cry broke on his ears, a cry of pain. . . .

He twirled round in amazement. Beryl Mason was right behind him, staggering a little, her face as white as a sheet and blood smearing her nostrils. She gave one brief, defiant smile then collapsed her length on the floor.

"Berry, you loyal little fool—!"

Hart stumbled towards her, lifted her with an effort to the long charting bench, bunched up his coat as a pillow. He paused only long enough to put the robot pilot in commission then turned to the job of reviving the girl. It did not take very long. Presently her eyelids fluttered open.

"The take-off is—is pretty awful, isn't it?" she muttered.

"Berry, why did you *do* this?" Hart tried to sound stern. "Think of the risk! It may mean death!"

"I know. I'm a bit of a scientist like you. But my place is beside you—and since you wouldn't see reason I decided to become a stowaway. I've always wanted to explore anyway, ever since I climbed trees as a kid. You can't send me back now," she finished seriously.

"But your dad will be frantic!"

"Not he. I left a letter which he'll have found by now."

Hart sighed. "Okay, you win. But you've destroyed my peace of mind for the rest of this trip— Better now?" He helped her to get to her feet, and for a moment they both staggered at the more than normal gravity occasioned by acceleration.

Slowly they moved to the window. In awed silence they gazed outside. It was breathtaking because it was a complete novelty; it was something which so far had only existed in their imaginations— The dead black void of space gilded with a myriad stars: the Sun with his twirling prominences and ghostly corona. Then the Moon toward which they were heading, her right hand limb beginning to shade off slightly as the full phase waned.

Clear, uncannily clear, the satellite hung there, her face traced with innumerable mountains and crater-pits, marred with the dead sea bottoms. Then there were those bright streaks and rays sweeping outwards from Ptolomy, Copernicus, and Tycho—more complex than ever when viewed through this perfect vacuum.

"Those rays—science's biggest mystery ever," Hart mused. "So many explanations and none of them convincing . . ." Pausing, he gazed in different directions with a frown. "Damned if I can see what could have caused Brice to—"

He turned, caught the girl in his arms as she swayed dizzily. Her face had gone deathly pale again. Her eyes, formerly filled with interest, were now fixed on the Moon's inscrutable disk in something like horror.

"Hart," she whispered, "I feel something terrible—stifling—trying to—"

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Her senses left her and she became limp in his grasp. He was so stunned with the suddenness of it that he didn't know what to do for the moment. Gently he laid her down on the floor, and at the same moment a vast wave of dizziness caught him, too, sent him sprawling across her. Whatever had come upon them it had affected the girl's more sensitive organism first.

HART got to his knees with difficulty, but he felt as though he were in hell itself. Fiery darts of radiation — vibration — were hammering and twisting through his skull. It made movement a titanic effort; thinking almost an impossibility. The wildest of delirium sought to blast his agonized brain.

He was going insane! And subconsciously he was aware of it! Mightily, superhumanly, he battled against it, using every scrap of his will power. He clawed his way to the switchboard, overmastering a desire to burst into peals of hysterical laughter. Reason, all the normal ideas associated with this amazing trip, were fleeing away from him.

He caught the switches, held onto them like grim death and turned the machine slowly round. As he half crouched, drooling in spite of himself, he saw the Moon apparently spin round in a dizzy half circle. The more he gazed at its dead, inscrutable face the wilder seemed to rage his emotions.

"I must!" he breathed to himself, doggedly. "I must get free!"

But how he was to do it he had no idea. He was in a daze. None the less he began to realize as the ship twisted round and moved Earthward that the crushing lunacy was beginning to relax, flowing away from him like an ebbing tide.

Faster he sent the ship hurtling on the return journey, until all Earth filled the space before his straining eyes. Less racked mentally—though by no means ruled by ordered sanity even now—he had the chance to notice one thing. Earth had turned on its axis so that the Sahara desert now faced the void—and the ship was falling towards it. Obviously then, since he had started from New York and got just about the same distance as Brice Mynak before being overcome, it had been purely law of science which had brought the aviator down in the country of his ancestors. . . .

Consciousness sought to desert Hart —but he knew that that meant death from a crash landing. He hung on somehow, guiding the ship until it tore through the atmosphere with the fiery trail of a comet. . . . Down and down, faster and faster, until the yellow sand came rushing up to meet him— He blasted the underjets at the last second. A stunning crash and the splitting of tortured air slammed into his senses. He went flying and collapsed into darkness.

STIFF, bruised, his head aching violently, Hart stirred again. He was in total darkness and silence, seemed to be huddled against the curved padded wall of the machine. He felt around him and unexpectedly gripped Beryl's hand. Obviously she had been thrown right beside him.

For a long time he tried to recall what had happened, then as he pieced the hectic last moments together he scrambled to his feet and felt around for the light switch. It operated, and the cool glow showed the machine tilted at a sharp angle. Outside the ports was dead blackness.

The immediate environment did not concern him. His brain was clear now, thank God, and that terrible madness

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had gone. He went over to the girl and for ten minutes gave all his attention to reviving her. By degrees he explained matters to her.

"But—but where are we?" she asked finally, as he helped her up.

He shrugged. "Last thing I saw was the Sahara—pretty nearly the same spot where Brice landed. I passed out then and don't know what happened—But we'll soon find out!"

He handed her a torch, took one himself, then opened the airlock. To their surprise they didn't step out into a night-covered desert or to the friendly voices of the men excavating Tri-Konam. No, they stepped out into the vast deserted reaches of an immense underground cavern, wrapped in the weighted silence of the tomb.

They were both too surprised to be afraid. Moving slowly away from the ship on rocky floor they presently turned and looked back at it. It was tilted nose down at forty degrees, its tail piled thick with rubble, rocks, and sand. Up above in the cavern roof there was a gaping fissure.

"I think I get it," Hart said at length. "We struck the sand nose down and plunged right through a weak seam in this roof into this cavern, bringing in the rocks on top of us. Guess it will take hours for anybody above—granting they saw us—to get us out. Wait a minute; I'll try the radio."

They hurried back into the ship, and to their relief the radio worked. Nor was it long before they made contact. The voice of engineer Freeman came through the loud speaker.

"Thank God you're alive, Mr. Dean! But it's going to take us a bit of time to get down to you, I'm afraid. . . ."

"Just whereabouts did we hit?" Hart interrupted.

"You went right through the sand about quarter of a mile south of the Tri-Konam towers. Guess you must have plunged into part of the city which hasn't yet been excavated. . . . Okay, you hang on. We'll dig you out with blasters."

Hart switched off and looked at Beryl. She seemed relieved.

"Take them some time anyway," she said. "Might as well do a bit of looking around while we wait. . . ."

AGAIN they left the ship, flashing their torches as they went. The cavern seemed endless in extent, cyclopean in its vastness. It receded into shadowy darkness far away—but that it had once been used was clearly obvious for there were the rough outlines of roads; then as they advanced further they beheld shattered stone colonnades which had obviously been the work of intelligent beings at one time. There were even dwellings, queerly designed, smashed amidst a wilderness of boulders.

"Obviously all part of the still unexcavated Tri-Konam," Beryl said after a while.

"Yeah," Hart acknowledged, and he was obviously pondering. Then he said, "Come to look at it, the walls of this cavern are not solid rock; they're composed of countless hundreds of rocks piled solidly on top of one another and fused partly together by some vast heat. Suppose this city were originally on the surface but rocks piled so thickly around it that it became buried in a cavern?"

"Doc Andrews has thought of that," the girl reflected. "But how did so many boulders get fused round a city . . .?"

Hart couldn't answer that one. They went on, gazing about them fascinatedly. Then they both glanced at each other as ahead of them in the midst of the ruin they saw four massive

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pieces of apparatus, age-old, but with their outlines still plainly discernible.

When they came up to the machines they found them supporting a chimney-like mass of metal each, going up through the cavern roof. To each machine was still linked a maze of stout cables, all leading to a power engine of fantastic design.

"Doesn't make sense to me," Hart muttered. "These things look rather like the special stoves used for making pottery — you know, like an inverted tundish with a squarish chimney—" He stopped suddenly, catching the same amazing thought as Beryl.

"We're at the base of the four square towers!" she ejaculated.

"Of course!" He stared in wonder. "So far unexcavated—"

Immediately they both forgot all about the rest of the ruins and instead concentrated on studying the four machines in front of them. After some searching they discovered there was a way *inside* the machines. Carefully they entered one of them, found themselves in a sort of square metal chamber, standing on a device of massive springs and complicated switches. Over their heads yawned the cavernous dark of the flue, its outlet obviously blocked since surface testings had shown the chimneys had a stone foundation.

"I'm going to take a look up here," Hart said, and catching onto the chinks in the steel he made his way up with comparative ease, stopped finally when he came to solid stone—a mighty block of it barring his way. He puzzled over it in the torchlight, then dropped back to the girl's side.

"This isn't a foundation; it's jammed half way up the flue," he said. "Just as though heat had fused it there. Same sort of stone the Pyramids are made from—a great square block of it. No wonder it was mistaken for a foundation stone by those above."

BAFFLED, they looked back at the floor on which they stood.

Hart said slowly, "This machinery, what's left of it, is like the stuff they used to use to fire ballistas. You know, those old fashioned catapult things. I wonder—"

"If these things are ballistas on a giant scale?" Beryl broke in quickly. "Why not? The Egyptians used to have 'em."

"Yeah—but firing blocks weighing countless tons! The power that would be needed!"

"Maybe they had it. The machines linked to all this spring mechanism—and particularly the big one where the wires join up—are right beyond us anyway. Atomic force perhaps. . . ." The girl gave a hopeless little sigh. "After all, we're not archaeologists: better turn the problem over to Dr. Andrews and let him worry. Our job is to solve what's wrong in space. We're still licked in trying to get to the Moon, remember."

Hart nodded gloomily. "But we won't be! We'll solve what's wrong out there in space even if it kills us. 'Least I will."

"That means me, too," she said seriously.

They gave up their searching and climbed out into the cavern again, spending their journey back to the space ship studying the city's remains. Undoubtedly there were endless evidences to show that Hart's theory had probably been correct—that the whole place had been battered and pounded until the surrounding cavern walls had been made from piled-up rocks.

"And the rocks would erode into sand under weather conditions," he summed up. "So we get the Sahara. Once there was a mighty, prosperous city here and

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a very intelligent race back of it—not necessarily the Egyptians but the ones who built the Sphinx and Pyramids. We've no proof the Egyptians ever made those."

"And Brice was descended from the Egyptians," the girl mused. "Remember him saying all that about chariots of fire dropping to the city? Space ships? Or shells or something? Rocks?"

"Possibly." Hart gave a perplexed shrug. "Oh, leave it to Doc Andrews. It's his job anyway, not ours. We'll hand him the dope the moment we're rescued. . . ."

THEY had time to get a meal and a sleep before the first sizzling fire of a rock blaster burst through into their underground prison. Then in a few minutes safety ladders began to appear. The rescue party came into view, looking round curiously. Freeman came hurrying over.

"Say, what kind of a place is this anyway?"

"Along with Doc Andrews you are going to find out," Hart said briefly. "Come along to base camp and I'll tell you all about it. . . ."

From the base camp radio calls went out for Doc Andrews, and the girl's father. Fast airplanes brought both of them before dawn was paling the eastern sky. Doc Andrews in particular, the best archaeologist in America, listened interestedly to all that was told him. He was a lean, little man with rimless glasses and a fluffy white head.

"Maybe the answer to the whole problem of who built Tri-Konam," he said finally. "I'll take charge of excavations right away. Freeman, come with me."

"All this is very well," Mason said gravely, "but what good does it do us? Beyond turning yourself and Berry nearly insane, Hart, you've gotten nowhere with this second effort. Don't you think it's time you gave up?"

"No!" Hart retorted. "I'm going to conquer the first space leap somehow. I plan to stay here for the moment and supervise the salvaging of the rocket ship from underground. We can get it repaired where necessary and then figure out a new plan of campaign. But that Moon is going to be conquered!"

CHAPTER III

Desperate Journey

WHILE the salvaging of the machine went on, Dr. Andrews went to work with tireless energy in the caverns below, ruling over his army of willing helpers.

A couple of weeks passed, in which time Hart had had the time to carefully examine the damage sustained by the rocket ship—then one evening as the party sat in their tent at a late supper Dr. Andrews came hurrying in, eyes glinting behind his glasses.

"I believe I've sorted the mystery out!" he cried, plumping down at the table. "It's a most amazing story, believe me—but from the records we've found and deciphered I think it's right. The place *is* a continuation of Tri-Konam, by the way, for the hieroglyphics are the same as those already discovered. That made me able to make instantaneous translations. Anyway . . .

"There are some ancient charts in the ruins which show the Moon—but it's not the Moon that we know. This one is covered with clouds and obviously has an atmosphere!"

The others looked at him sharply. He went on,

"Other records reveal that the people who built this city originally came from the Moon—and there are a number of still fairly useful space ships to prove

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the fact. But from the unsavory history they possess it seems that they fall into the category of what we'd call gangsters—or else were ostracized from the Moon on account of criminal scientific activity. They came to Earth with various notions of vengeance, it appears. And they were clever—far cleverer than anybody we know today. What they looked like we don't know, but records seem to show that they were not unlike animal-men . . . like the Sphinx itself for instance.

"They wanted vengeance," Andrews repeated seriously; "and they chose an amazing way of exacting it. At the time they erected the city of Tri-Konam the Sahara desert did not exist; it was a rock-strewn plain. The outcast Selenites, it appears, hit on the idea of hurling meteorites at the moon which had disowned them! In other words, giant blocks of stone from the plain were used, blocks which would become hell-laden bombs of devastation when they hit the Moon because of her small area compared to Earth . . ."

"My God, the lunar craters!" Hart ejaculated.

"So it would appear. Nor did they put over a rush job. They collected endless blocks, using giant levitators whose lifting system we can as yet only guess at. They gathered vast piles of ammunition, high enough to be level with the tops of the guns they intended using. That is why the Pyramids are the same height as those four square tower-guns. Machinery obviously lowered the blocks into the gun muzzles. As far as I can judge, atomic force fired the blocks. And the effect on the Moon can be imagined!

"Endless meteors must have hurtled at it from Earth, pounded it to blazes, raised vast mountains, gouged deep craters, lifted the tortured atmosphere to boiling point and evaporated the seas themselves. But apparently the Selenites on the Moon had the time to retaliate for this brutal vindictiveness. They devised similar methods and fired numberless rocks back at Earth. They were better aimed than those from the aggressors and the vast majority crashed down on Tri-Konam. There are faded photographs to prove that much. As one crashed on another at white heat they liquefied into each other, became a solid wall round the city, since the city itself was no doubt protected by some means or another. But finally the city was buried in a cup of molten rock. The Pyramids remained, their sloping sides permitting no grip for hurtling rock. The surface rocks underwent weather change and a desert formed. Tri-Konam vanished under what has become the Sahara desert. . . .

"So apparently both sides were wiped out," Andrews concluded. "Apparently the Earth-guns fused with the excessive heat, a block in each barrel—which by the way can be easily removed. The Moon was wiped out, her air gone, and her face bearing to this day the scars of the onslaught. . . ."

"AND," Hart said slowly, rubbing his chin, "you say these Selenites probably looked like the Sphinx?"

"Probably," Andrews nodded. "Of course it is possible that some of them escaped to the outer world—but each succeeding generation would more and more conform to the laws governing this planet, would become more bipedial. Eventually, no doubt, they formed the nucleus of what later became the Egyptian race, and by a mass instinct they chose to live near the site of their long forgotten ancestors from the Moon."

"Which might explain Brice Mynak's dying visions," Mason put in quickly. "He was Egyptian by descent, of

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course. Suppose, as he died, he had a flashback of memory through his ancestry—as so often happens just before death? He spoke of a city being bombarded by chariots of fire— That bears out the meteors. And then he mentioned about loading the towers, which also fits in."

Hart nodded slowly, thinking. "And it might explain—though I don't know how—the reason for the mad insanity in the void."

"But where is the connection?" Beryl asked, puzzled.

"Listen," Hart said seriously. "If a race throws out a collection of undesirables, and it has great scientific power, it also makes darned well sure that said undesirables never return. And not only them, but their descendants! These few on Earth would presumably be destroyed far quicker than the vast number on the Moon. Those on the Moon no doubt wanted to be sure that all survivors and descendants of the outcasts would *stay* on Earth and never again reach the Moon to perpetrate more villainy. So, between Earth and Moon some sort of barrier was established. Something to defeat all efforts to reach the Moon!"

"Just a theory," Mason shrugged, unconvinced.

"I disagree!" Hart shook his head emphatically. "Stratopilots, as we know, sometimes go crazy by flying too high, whereas aeronauts of the ordinary type get spells of amnesia. We know what happened to Brice and to us in space where no atmosphere at all could shield us— Again, don't forget that at full moon lunacy on Earth is by no means an uncommon thing among certain types of people, and usually in spots where the atmosphere is least dense."

Mason gave an incredulous smile. "Are you seriously suggesting that the Moon is training waves of—of lunacy to prevent anybody reaching it?"

"It's worth a bet," Hart snapped. "We've evidence to support the theory, too— And I'm going to get busy proving it on the next hop. One-half of the mystery is solved: the rest will come the same way."

"And the next immediate move?" Beryl questioned.

"We radio to the Mount Everest Observation Unit. I want lunar recordings . . ."

With that Hart headed out of the tent to the radio camp, left the others looking at each other dubiously. . . .

ANOTHER week passed in the sweltering heat of the desert, Dr. Andrews finding more evidences to support his already provable explanation of the Pyramids and Moon. Space ships, battered but well capable of revival, were brought to light.

To Hart, however, all this was a side issue. He was waiting for a reply from Mount Everest— And at last the needed reports came through. He spent an evening studying them with Beryl, Mason, and Andrews grouped around him.

"Definitely we've got something," he breathed at last, pointing to the graphs which had been teleradioed to him. "These show a distinct and unusual radiation being generated by the Moon when she is at the full, dwindling as she reaches the quarters, and fading entirely at New Moon. Lunacy is always at full moon, and we and Brice made our trips at the full moon also—so we got the full blast of this unknown radiation . . ."

He paused, studying the Observatory notes. Again he contacted Mount Everest by radio, said as he waited, "They don't know what this unknown wavelength represents. Their Physical

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Laboratory had better find out—"

As the Observatory replied he gave the details, then added, "Better make sure that nobody in your Physics department gets in the way of that radiation when you try and duplicate its wave-length. It might either kill or produce total imbecility . . ."

With that he switched off and waited, pondered a while.

"Since it occurs at full Moon it must be connected with the Sun," Beryl said thoughtfully. "The Moon only shines by reflected light. It seems that the absence of radiation at new moon is—"

"Idiots that we are!" Hart interrupted her suddenly, his eyes gleaming. "What are the most dominant things on the Moon at the full? And partly at the quarters? Why, the bright rays and streaks from Tycho, Ptolomey, and Copernicus! Nobody has ever yet figured them out— And no wonder!"

"But," Mason argued, "at the new Moon they can still be seen reflecting Earthshine."

"What of it? Earth's illumination means nothing. It is *solar* action that does something, and since the Moon always reveals the same face to Earth the effect repeats every time— By God, I'll swear we're getting at it!"

HE FELL to eager thought, pulling his underlip—then he switched on the radio as the signal sounded again.

"Say, Hart," came the voice from Everest, "it's a darned good job you warned us to keep clear of this radiation! It's dynamite! We tried it on a rabbit and it went stark crazy."

"Did it die?" Hart questioned.

"No — just went nuts. Same thing happened to a white mouse—"

"That's all I need to know. Thanks a lot."

Hart switched off and looked at the others tensely.

"We've got it! Lunacy radiations *are* generated by the Moon, but in the main very few of them reach Earth's surface because of the atmosphere. Maybe they're not intended to anyway: they are just there to stop anybody trying to get to the Moon. Begins to look as though my guess was right. The Selenites went to a great deal of trouble to stop any gangsters getting back."

"But the Selenites must be dead by now!" Beryl cried. "What is the idea of prolonging—"

"I don't know. But I'm going to the Moon to find out. Maybe it's a legacy —automatic—which will go on until somebody stops it."

"You daren't try again!" Mason protested.

"There *is* a way!" Hart breathed, his eyes gleaming. "I must start off from Earth just after the last quarter of the Moon when the radiations are ebbing to minimum at new Moon. I've got to reach the Moon then before the first quarter—that is in fourteen days. I should make it. . . ." He straightened up. "I've *got* to," he finished simply.

"Then I'm coming with you," Beryl said quickly; but he shook his head.

"Not this time, Berry. This is a real gamble with death and I'm not taking that chance."

She was silent, looking out towards the desert. Then she gave a shrug.

"Okay, perhaps you're right. . . . And I suppose you know that the Moon's last quarter is tomorrow night?"

"I know. I leave first thing tomorrow morning. . . ."

AT DAWN, after an undemonstrative farewell, Hart took off in the fully repaired rocket ship. His mind was so concentrated on his job that he hardly gave a thought to the desperate risk he was undoubtedly taking. Imbecility, death itself, lay before him unless he

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made the grade in time. Space was not even charted to help him: he was the first lone pioneer blazing the trail between Earth and Moon—

Yet he sat down before the control board as calmly as if he were making the usual flight from New York to Australia.

In a few minutes the dawn-lit vista of the Sahara was whirling away under the rear tubes. Again blood trickled from his nostrils; and anguish belted him as he tore against Earth's gravity—up and out into the void. Regardless of his physical sufferings he pushed the power up notch by notch. Speed! Everything depended on it!

Ahead of him the Moon was a thick crescent, the copper brown of the earthlit portion merging into ragged lines along the terminator. Two hundred and forty thousand miles in fourteen days? It might be possible. He was using no super-fuel, though, only ordinary monoxite, the most powerful fuel known to Earth so far. Yes, he *might* do it, but with precious little margin to spare.

Rest was the most incessant demand made of him. The strain of space flying was unbelievable, he found, and there were no fancy gadgets to help him; those would come from the space engineers of the future. All he got were the crushing pressures of acceleration, the lightheadedness and sickness of disorganized internal functions. For hours at a stretch he lay in the eternally sunlit cabin, sprawled out, giving out radio signals to Earth to say what grand condition he was in.

Time and again he was delayed, swerved off his course by brickbat swarms. Later, he decided, ships must have repellers. Each time he re-set the course he noted worriedly how much schedule had been nipped.

With growing anxiety he watched the crescent appear on the waxing edge of the new Moon. Earth was well behind now, pink-rimmed, green tinted. The Moon filled all the void, and deep in the coppery bowl of its night, reflecting star and earth-shine, Hart saw quite clearly those deadly points from which he was convinced spewed death and insanity . . . the streaks and rays.

He had been on the way now for 12 days, 16 hours—but now he was within the Moon's gravity field his speed would increase even more. More than once he thought his heart would stop from the sensation of everlasting headlong falling. Hours—minutes—days—nights— He didn't know which was which or where he was. Everything was in hopeless confusion in his brain. He lay now on his stomach, one leaden hand on the rocket switches, the ship dropping towards the ever-spreading sunlit tide engulfing plain, mountain, and dead sea bottom.

Already the fingers of the Sun were creeping to the fatal points. He drove on desperately, headed round the limb of the Moon away from the center to the furthest point on the still dark side.

Lower —faster — Jerking — twisting. A headlong dive!

He landed with a crash that shook the wits out of him. But as his senses departed he had a deep subconscious thrill. . . . He was the first man to reach the Moon!

CHAPTER IV

The Final Gamble

IT WAS still dark when he recovered —the frozen, searing dark of the lunar night, the stars frostily still in coal-black sky; the Earth bisected by the saw teeth of the mountain range beside which the ship had dropped. It was dreary, unthinkably desolate.

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Hart shuddered, made himself some hot coffee and ate a little food; then he scrambled into his spacesuit and made his way outside cautiously, torch in one hand and lethal gun in the other.

Sunrise, he realized, was still some time off, and for that he was thankful: he had little desire to wander around in a temperature near that of boiling water. He was none too sure of this first space suit's insulation: it might let him down.

First he examined the ship—and got a shock. Three of the tubes were smashed to hell! Grim-faced, he stared at them, then with a fatalistic shrug of his shoulders he turned and headed to the top of the ridge forming the lower foothills of the mountain range. From here the sight which greeted him was surprising.

Across a ragged plain he was gazing at a solitary ray, pale gray in shade and hardly visible, projecting upwards—*Earthwards!* Beyond the near-horizon were two more rays, obviously from more distant craters, and they too were pale and dim like faded searchlights, reflecting only star and Earthshine at the moment.

"Tycho, Copernicus, Ptolomey," Hart whispered to himself. "This one as I figure the geography, must be Tycho . . ."

Down here, *behind* the rays so to speak, no sense of mental turmoil touched him. He advanced again, over rills and crevices, leapt ravines in the lighter gravity—on and on, until he came to within close range of Tycho crater. Through a cleft in the surrounding hills he stared down onto it, perplexed.

The whole crater floor was a shifting sea of pearly light—and being to one side of it no influence reached him. As yet the sun had not reached this far, though it was approaching as he could see from distant mountain peaks, tipped with ice-white brightness.

Finally he scrambled down towards the crater, tripped over something, and went flying. Going back to examine it he found a thin wire, of all things! And tracing it back he found it went in a circle round the crater, fastened to stumps of substance that seemed like ebonite.

Animal snare? Private property? He didn't know; but it seemed an odd idea to put a wire around a crater as one might round an earthly sheep field. He gave it up at last, went to the very edge of the shifting substance on he crater floor—and then found that it did *not* shift. It was motionless: the illusion of movement was created by endless ripplings of radiation.

PULLING a ladle from his equipment he gathered a scoopful of the stuff and withdrew it carefully, began to return to the ship. But as he went, looking back, he was aware of something. For some reason the three ashy-gray beams had now been augmented by three more beams, pale violet in color, tracing like lavender fingers into the void.

The riddles buzzing in his brain deepened—and deepened again when, still continuing shipwards, he did his best to find some sort of entrance into the Moon's interior. Every time he drew a total blank. All openings, gaps, crevices, pits, were sealed up—apparently by flowed lava. There was no way in.

Disgusted, weary, he got back to the ship and set to work on the crater's material with analyzing instruments. He had been at it for an hour when the sun smote down through the window like a finger from hell, sending the ship's temperature up by leaps and bounds.

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Hart shut the airlock promptly and took off his spacesuit. The heat abated somewhat as insulation returned. He screwed his eyes at girdling prominences and flame white brilliance beating from over the mountain range, then went on with his analysis out of the sunlight.

Finally he gave a little gasp of amazement, contacted Earth over the radio short wave and heard the welcome voices of Mason and Beryl answer back immediately.

"I've solved what causes the lunacy, anyway," he said, when the fervent greetings were over. "The craters responsible for rays are filled with a metallic isotope, laboratory-created, I should think. It absorbs and retransmits solar wave-lengths, these wave-lengths being identical to the ones produced in the Mount Everest laboratory. Some crystals on Earth—tourmaline for one—absorb only one particular radiation and retransmit it: tourmaline does that with light. This isotope does it with brain-irritating radiations.

"Normally of course the sun transmits a whole mass of radiations, one of which neutralizes another. Taken in bulk they are harmless: but one of them singled out can be deadly. The one singled out here *is* deadly, as we know. And in each case the radiation is aimed at Earth. Thanks to the atmosphere it doesn't penetrate all the way to Earth's surface—"

"But it *is* doing!" Mason cried abruptly. "It started about two hours ago. Reports are coming in from everywhere of serious disturbances affecting people the moment the Moon rises! *Something has happened,* Hart! Stratopilots report that the atmosphere at the upper levels is being affected by some electronic stream which is disrupting parts of the ionic layer—"

"Wait!" Hart gasped. "Wait a minute—!"

HE STUMBLED quickly to the port, a memory blazing through his brain—a memory of a wire round Tycho crater, which he had snapped. Wire on ebonite poles. Then those subsidiary beams of violet which had mysteriously come into being . . . !

Dumbfounded, he stared outside on the blinding brilliance of the rays from the now sunlit craters. Yes, those violet beams were also still visible against the jet backdrop of sky . . . He swung back to the radio.

"I believe I've done something terrible!" he panted. "I fell over a wire a while back, and snapped it. It was some sort of a bait, I guess—broke a contact or something which started machinery hidden under the craters. Machinery in this lunar underworld . . . That must be it," he went on desperately. "For all I know this Moon may be honeycombed with such snares. It must be the second and final safeguard laid by the Selenites. If anybody *did* chance to reach the Moon they laid this other trap, knowing it would be bound to be started finally. Electromagnetic beams directed at Earth's atmosphere are to stop anybody else coming from Earth by driving *them*—everybody—to madness!"

"But can't you do something?" Mason demanded hoarsely. "The disaster may not be so big *this* full Moon, but those electromagnetic beams will keep on tearing down our ionic shield until the next full Moon—then trouble will blast down in real earnest. Don't you see?"

"Yes, I see," Hart acknowledged grimly. "But I can't get into the underground anyway. The caves, rills, and chasms are all sealed—for reasons quite obvious now. I don't think any

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life exists here any more, but it's evident that machinery was left behind situated under each special crater and ready wired—Say, wait a minute!"

Hart broke off, thinking. "Under each crater," he repeated slowly. Then his voice tautened. "There's one chance, just one! I've no explosive powerful enough to wreck the place, and I could not get back to Earth if I wanted. The only alternative is for you to fire at this satellite with your ballista guns from Tri-Konam!"

"What!" Mason ejaculated. "But it's impossible! They're so old and—"

"But they're intact," Hart interrupted. "And Andrews himself said it wouldn't be difficult to free their bores of those stone blocks. It's the only way: and it must be done in time for the rocks to land here before the next full Moon. As soon as you can possibly do it. I'll guide your aim by radio from here."

"And you?" Mason asked anxiously.

"Yes, what about you?" Beryl's voice asked in alarm. "If we succeed with these ballistas we'll give the Moon a terrible pounding, and you might—"

"Get those things right and fire!" Hart ordered doggedly. "Get Dr Andrews busy. I'll look after myself . . . When you have got the guns working contact me."

And to prevent further argument he switched off . . .

FOR a long time he sat thinking, scowling through the port onto the sun-drenched, inhospitable scene. He was only just commencing to realize that he had virtually signed his own death warrant. If he was to direct the meteorites' paths by radio he certainly couldn't get very far away from here. And one meteor a bit off the target might very easily mean—

"Looks like you let yourself in for something, feller," he said, getting to his feet; then more for the sake of something to do than anything else he went out into the blaze to confirm his earlier suspicions that all means of entering the underground were sealed up.

They were—utterly. For a long time he surveyed those deadly rays pointing upwards, made estimates of distance with his instruments for target-direction purposes, then glanced towards the green Earth on which they were focused. A nostalgic feeling swept over him. He thought how nice it would be to have security again and Beryl beside him.

"Dope!" he grunted, and trailed back to his battered machine. Thereafter he stuck to the ship. The heat was too intense outside for prolonged investigation anyway. So he spent the time thinking, eating, sleeping, and marveling somewhat at the different rate of time upon the Moon. The 14-day lunar day had gone again at a surprising rate and cold, inexorable night shut down again.

Then at last his nerve racking vigil was broken as the radio gave out its deep signal tone. The moment he snapped the switch Mason's tired but eager voice came through.

"Still there, Hart? Well, we managed it— Thanks to Andrews! Restoration work is finished and the ballista towers are ready to fire. But why don't you leave the Moon and let the astronomers chart the target accurately?"

"How can they?" Hart demanded. "There's no air to fire the rocks as they fall. All that will be visible on Earth will be friction flashes . . . No, I've got to direct operations. And besides," he finished dryly, "I guess I'm here for keeps. I smashed the ship to blazes when I landed."

"Hart!" came Beryl's voice, aghast.

"Forget it, Berry," he said quietly.

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"I'm doing useful service right here, I guess. Remember me now and again when a space lane service is opened—" He stopped, finished crisply, "Okay, make your first shot and I'll tell you what happens."

In his mind's eye Hart could picture Mason giving the signal. He left the radio, almost heedless of Mason's curt announcement that the first boulder had been fired. . . . Standing at the port he watched the backdrop of blazing stars —the distant worlds. He counted seconds mechanically . . . Seconds—minutes—an hour. And it was an hour that drifted into eternity, it seemed.

HE WAS cold and cramped with waiting when all of a sudden, without the least warning, a titanic concussion from somewhere near the horizon shook the very ground whereon the spaceship stood. He stared out towards distant Ptolomey. And more rocks descended, chipping pieces out of the mountain ranges, drawn by the Moon's gravity field.

"Nice going!" he shouted into the radio. "You're hitting right in to the Ptolomey area. Keep it up—and aim for Tycho later on. You'll have to hit Ptolomey and Copernicus as best you can: I'm too far away to direct you. But Tycho's a cinch. Seems like the initial speed through Earth's atmosphere is so swift the boulders hardly lose any size. And here there is no diminution at all, of course. What's your initial take-off speed?"

"Thirty miles a second," Mason said.

"Okay—keep going."

So, after another long wait, bombardment began in real earnest. Hart watched in fascinated interest as boulder after boulder came flying invisibly from the void to hammer beyond the horizon. Here and there they missed hopelessly as a quirk of gravity in space had drawn them off their trajectory. One such landed with shattering force not fifty yards from the spaceship, made it bounce so violently that Hart thought he was a goner for sure.

But there were more hits than misses. In the still abysmal dark of the lunar night he saw flash after flash from the distant craters as rocks slammed into rocks, battering—pounding—wrecking. Harder and thicker they came— The Copernicus rays went out!

Hart gave a whoop of joy and yelled the news over the radio. Encouraged by this success the bombardment started again on a new angle, all four ballistas obviously at work now. In thirty minutes of incessant hammering Ptolomey went of the same way as Copernicus, and like its fellow both violet and "lunacy" rays expired.

"Okay, now for Tycho!" Hart cried. "I'll direct you!"

This time, after the usual interval, the onslaught was dangerously near to him. Then one of those erring boulders came whizzing from nowhere, hit the nose of the spaceship and sent it pitching into the emptiness. Stunned with the shock Hart went flying— But he didn't lose consciousness.

He groped his way to his feet, the very ground rolling and shaking under him now with the incessant fall of rocks hammering into Tycho crater. Right now he felt he needed some kind of movement, release from this damnable prison which barred his view of the crater proper. If he had to be snuffed out he preferred it outside anyway, where he might have a chance to see what was coming.

"You're on the target," he said into the radio. Then with an effort. "Goodby, and good luck."

He didn't wait to hear an answer. Switching off he stumbled outside, moving stiffly in his clumsy spacesuit. For

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a while he stood contemplating the amazing sight of rocks by the dozen raining one after another into Tycho—but those two obstinate rays still continued. One only could be obliterated by covering the crater with rocks, smothering the isotope's power to reflect; and the other by enough force to mash through to whatever machinery lay buried below.

FOR an hour he watched, saw the "lunacy" radiation dim to a mere nothing—but that obstinate violet ray remained. He turned back to the ship, intending to radio a change of position—but at the identical moment a "wanderer" slammed down clean on top of the ship and smashed it flat.

Hart ducked, lying flat as pieces of rock and metal whirled over his head. He got up again presently and stared back at Tycho. Still the rocks were missing that vital violet beam. He got up, raced toward it in flying leaps in the light gravity.

Staring into the crater he saw that all of it was covered except one spot of half a mile in the center—clearly the one vital spot under which lay the violet-ray machinery. Somehow the boulders had got to be directed right onto the target center.

He was baffled for a while, then he unstrapped his heavy torch from his belt. It was possible that giant 500-inch reflector on Mount Wilson would see his signal . . . He ran to the clear patch, knee deep in isotope, its power zero without the sunshine. Kneeling down he flashed the torch on and off continously for nearly ten minutes—then he left it on, bulb Earthwards, and hurried to the safety of the crater edge.

Not five minutes afterwards the rocks started to fall more inward in their flight towards the crater center. His signal had been seen then. Breathless, he watched. Nearer—nearer— Then there was a direct hit!

Several things happened at once. A mass of boulders crashed right into the crater's interior, putting out the violet ray but at the same time hurtling Hart upwards from the force of a titanic explosion. Probably some power had been stored down there to drive machinery and had blown up—

Hart thought he would never stop rising, so slight was the gravity and so vast the explosion. But that he must fall back he well knew—and to death. His spacesuit would rip. Not that it made much difference anyway. He was doomed—

IT WAS Beryl's eager eyes that looked into his as his senses returned. His spacesuit and helmet had gone and he was lying on a rough bed with head propped up.

"Berry!" he gasped hoarsely. "How—? What—?"

"You're all right," she said softly. "And I've radioed back to dad to stop the bombardment. Thank the stars that that explosion blew you up or I might never have found you . . ."

She hurried into an explanation.

"When you said that your machine was wrecked I remembered Doc Andrews having said that there were spaceships in Tri-Konam. I got one overhauled immediately and set off into space without dad's knowledge. Being new Moon I figured I could make it—and I did. I kept clear of the boulder stream, found you more by accident than design, dropped a gadget this ship has got—an attractor beam— And there we are!"

Hart nodded slowly, caught her hand.

"Space is ready," he said quietly. "Luna is conquered— But does she look different without her streaks and rays!"

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MADCAP OF MARS

By FESTUS PRAGNELL

A strange madness struck Mars, and even the emperor spoke gibberish! It was beyond all understanding . . .

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PRINCESS WIMPOLO, daughter of Emperor Usulor and heiress to the throne and to the overlordship of all Mars, is the dearest girl I've ever known and everything to me that a wife should be, even though, she weighing half a ton to my seven stone, I can't sit her on my lap as most husbands do but have to sit on hers instead. True, she is used to giving orders and likes to have her own way, but so would you if you were the only child of the boss of a whole planet.

The little Earth colony on Mars might not have nearly such a good time if it was not for Wimp. We are very few among the gigantic people who live in the underground world of Mars. We might get kicked around pretty badly. But, thanks to the sweetness of Wimp, we got taken up as pets and playthings of the rich people of Mars. Rich ladies would take their little Earthlings around with them saying, in Martian, "Come along, Fido!" "Balance this lump of sugar on your tiny nose, Johnny!" "Watch the little darling jump right over my head when I point up and whistle!" "Huh! Talk about your Jacko! My Alice can balance herself on one hand on the top of my head for a whole minute!" In the light gravity of Mars we could do surprising tricks. Not very dignified, but the best of everything there was in Mars we got.

All that was altered when Wimp married me. We still do tricks in parlors and at tea-parties, but now we are hon-

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ored guests. Many Martian ladies did as Wimp did and married their pet Earthlings. The more muscular of them carried their husbands around in their shopping bags. Can't say I quite liked that. Gave me a nasty feeling that a store for the sale of husbands from Earth might be opened one day. But as long as Wimp is looking after us, any Martian who hurts an Earthling has to answer for it to her.

I don't say there isn't some jealousy about, mind you. Many Martian Princes had been sweet on Wimp. You can't help that sort of thing. Some of them made a lot of trouble. And lately a Space Pirate named Belangor had been sticking his nose into Martian affairs quite a bit.

Not that Wimp worried. She was not the nervous sort. I reckon she must have steel wires for nerves. If no trouble came to her she'd go out and find some. That was Wimp. She was quite capable of going out and hunting Belangor on her own.

It isn't fair really. Nearly worries her father daft sometimes. Me too. But you can't keep a girl like Wimp quiet. She isn't made that way.

Sometimes I don't even know what she's up to till I'm in the middle of it. Like the time she came dashing into our room, barked, "What, haven't you finished dressing yet? Oh, well, no time to finish now. Have to finish on the ship."

I had just time to say, "What ship?" when she picks me up, tucks me under her arm and did one of her elephant charges along the length of the palace corridor.

And me with only half my clothes on in front of all those ladies-in-waiting. But there it is. Because we are so small the Martians seem to think we ought to have no feelings that way. They must think of us as babies.

AND there in the palace yard was a round, glassy traffic sphere waiting, with my shadow at the wheel. That is what I call Vans ever since Wimp appointed him my Official Bodyguard. As though I needed a bodyguard. And one weighing more than a ton, too. Still, I always feel that Wimp is safer with Vans around. Stout fellow, Vans, even if he isn't very quick-witted.

Anyway, Wimp lifts me by the slack of my pants and chucks me in the back, jumps in after me and says, "Get cracking!" to Vans.

Vans grins and starts the sphere.

By that time I knew where I was. Wimp was up to another of her games. She hadn't told me in case I told her father and he put a stop to her foolishness.

So I got up and I said, trying to sound as dry as I felt, "And where is it this time?"

And Wimp looks round and she says, the hussy, "Oh, didn't I tell you? I'm *so* sorry."

And I said, "No, I reckon you must have sort have forgotten to do so," all sarcastic.

And all she did was to tickle me under the ear and say, "Poor little Twiddleums! Was ums little dignity hurt?"

That's the sort of thing I have to put up with.

So, I turned to Vans, and I said, "Perhaps you can tell me where we are going."

He looks at Wimp, and she nods. (I believe they thought I didn't see.) And he says, "We are going to Deimos, Prince."

"Deimos!" I said with a start. "I don't wonder you didn't want your father to know. That's about the most dangerous trick you could get up to. I reckon your dad would have called out the entire army to stop you."

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"Just what I was afraid of," she said carelessly.

"What's the attraction on Deimos, anyway?" I asked.

"The pirate ship," says Wimp.

"Meaning the Ace of Spades?" I asked. "The ship of Belangor the Butcher, Venusian Space Pirate which we captured? That crashed."

"It's been repaired now."

"And the men on it?"

"All in my father's jails now. Reached Mars yesterday."

"Do you mean to say," I gasped, "that that beautiful ship has just been left on Deimos without anybody to look after it?"

"Afraid so."

"And what do you aim to do?"

"Go for a run round in it. Isn't it a shame that a lovely ship like that should be doing nothing?"

"Sure it is. But your dad—"

"Oh, him! He'd keep me tied to the end of a piece of string while he always held the other if he had his way."

"He's only looking out for your safety," I said. "All the same I'd enjoy a run in that ship myself."

CHAPTER II

The Emperor in Pursuit

EMPEROR USULOR had a sore head and was making everybody round him pay for it. General Stan Dattease went out of the Emp's room with tears running down his face. It was not usual for Martian generals to walk about crying. But Dattease had an excuse. The Emp had got so excited he had grabbed hold of the general's mustache and nearly pulled it off his lip. "And I'd throw my hand in and tell him to run his own blooming army," the general growled to a friend, "if I didn't know he'd send for me tomorrow and say he didn't mean it and let's be friends and won't I have one of his special drinks with that vitamin in it that his doctors have only just discovered and don't know what it does to you yet?"

Then the Emp found that return number ZK17652/L (in Martian) was not complete. And you should have heard him. But the Secretary of State said the forms were not printed yet. That did it! He called the printers on the teleview and really did let himself go that time. Then the master printer got a word in and said he hadn't got the okay for printing because the Emp hadn't made up his mind whether the form should be diamond shaped or circular or in red ink on green paper or yellow ink on blue paper.

Well, naturally, when the master printer told the Emp he hadn't printed the forms because the Emp himself hadn't given the okay, that made the Emp madder than ever. Because he couldn't chew himself up and pull his own mustache. Not without looking silly, anyway. And that made him like a boiler without a safety-valve. All steam up and nobody to go for sort of style.

And that, naturally, had to be the moment when somebody walks in and says, "Her Highness, Princess Wimpolo, is missing!"

A WEIRD cry rang through the palace, echoing through miles of caverns, the way very loud sounds do in Mars. It was the cry of the lulong or Martian tiger, an enormous and terrible creature, now, luckily, rather rare. Guards snatched up their deathrays. Searchlights were turned on. Parties began to search the palace grounds and all caverns within miles of the Imperial Palace.

Usulor stopped with his mouth open.

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"Where did that noise come from?" he demanded.

"I thought it came from somewhere near the Emperor," murmured somebody.

"What nonsense! My voice was drowned by that thing. What useless guards I must have to let such creature get so close to the palace! Why have I nobody but fools and ninnies 'round me?"

But he couldn't stop to explain to the guards exactly what he thought of them just now. He had something that mattered more on his hands.

"Televiewer Weil Hektorum," ordered the Emperor.

"Hektorum's office is tuned out of the television circuit," said an official.

"Then use my master key, you tub of grease!"

The televiewer caught Hektorum unlucky. His secretary was sitting on his knee. Hek and the secretary both looked up as the sound of the hooting of an owl came from the television screen. And they saw the face of the Emperor.

The secretary, mouth wide open in alarm, jumped off and ran.

"I was just training the girl in the wiles of a secret agent," said Hektorum, who was Chief of Emperor Usulor's Secret Service and the greatest detective on Mars.

"Hrrrmmmph!" said Usulor. At least, he tried to. But at the same moment a roar like that of an angry bear rang through the palace.

"When you have time," said Emperor Usulor, "I'd like you to find out who has turned my palace into a home for wild animals. Every time I open my mouth an owl squawks or a donkey brays. But I've got another job for you now. Wimp has done it again!"

"Oh, my socks!" groaned Hektorum. "Cuss the girl!"

"What did you say?"

"I said that I would carry out Your Excellency's wishes as rapidly as I can."

"See you do. Report to me here at once."

"But look here—"

Emperor Usulor had rung off. Hek sighed and threw a switch.

"Usual," he said to a trusted lieutenant.

"Usual?" repeated the other. "Her again?"

"Right. See to it, will you?"

"Same as before?"

"Right."

"Right."

SO HEK barged off to see old man Usulor, and not any too pleased about it either. And he found Usulor full of excitement.

"She's been traced to an airdrome," he said. "She set off in a small spaceboat. Don and Holors were with her."

"Oh!" said Hek. "Then all you got to do is to send a ship over to Deimos and Phobos, the two tiny moons of Mars, and pick them up."

"Is that where they'll be?"

"Where else in a tub that size?"

"You're right! Hek, you're a man of brains!"

"Quite a simple deduction," said Hek, carelessly. Then, suddenly, "Say!"

"What's biting you now?"

"What happened to that pirate ship? The one Prince Don called the Ace of Spades? That wouldn't be still on Deimos?"

Usulor asked an official who asked another official. At last they made up their minds that since nobody, it seemed, had moved the ship from Deimos, it might quite possibly, be still there.

"Hell!" said Hek. "Then that's

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where she's going. And once she gets on that she might go anywhere in it."

Usulor whistled. At least, he tried to, but an owl, hooting loudly at the same moment, drowned the sound. Hek looked closely at him.

"Whistle again," he said.

"No time for fooling," barks Usulor, and grabs hold of Hek by his sleeve and sets off running.

"Why, where are we going?"

"To the airdrome. We got to get to Deimos before my daughter does."

"Oh my socks!" groaned Hektorum, as he was whirled out of the palace, into a traffic sphere, into a space-boat and out into space without a chance to say "Good-bye" to anybody.

They passed Dattease on the way.

"Come along General!" called Usulor.

SO THAT Dattease, his lip still sore, had to pant along behind them.

"Say, where are we going?" the general asked, as they shot out into space and Usulor was out of the way in another cabin.

"On a wild-goose chase, I think," said Hektorum. "Trying to catch up with the madcap of Mars."

"Oh, why must she go to such awkward places?"

"There is some excuse for her," said Hek. "But her father is old enough to know better."

"Too true," sighed the general. "Too true. But I say, I wanted to ask you something. Now I got a chance."

"Go right ahead."

The general looked round anxiously.

"Hektorum, if you were me, would you shave off your mustache, I mean, my mustache?"

"But what for?"

"Then he couldn't pull it."

Hektorum set his great brain working on the problem.

"No, I wouldn't," he said at last.

"But why not?"

"When I was a boy," said Hektorum, "I had a schoolmaster who had lovely, long, sweeping golden mustaches just like yours. For many years the one desire of my life was to take hold of those mustaches and give a good hard pull and then tie them in a knot at the back of his neck. The Emperor does not know it, but when he pulls your mustache he is probably making a boyhood dream come true. If you had no mustaches he'd get another general."

"Perhaps you are right," sighed the general. "But oh, he does make my lip so sore!"

"Do that again," said Hektorum, frowning.

"Do what again?"

"Whatever it was you did then."

"I only sighed."

"Well, sigh again."

The general did.

"Ah, I thought so!"

"You thought what?"

"Did you hear then a curious sound, like a chicken crowing?"

"Why, yes I did."

"Sigh again."

The general did. This time it was quite clear.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

"Well!" said the general. "How did a chicken get on this ship, except in a can?"

"That sound, General," said Hektorum firmly, "came out of you."

CHAPTER III

Misunderstandings

"CATCHING" either Deimos or Phobos, the two moons of Mars, is never an easy job. The two bodies are so small and they go so fast that I can never understand how Earth

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astronomers were ever able to see them at all. Even with charts worked out almost to the minute, it takes me all my time to find the one I want. And when I've found it I have to chase it like a long dog after a rabbit. And on a job like that these small space-boats bounce one about more than a bit. Catching Deimos usually gives one a few bruises.

Anyway, we made it.

The "Ace of Spades" lay black and clear among the shiny glass bubbles that the Martians had built on the faces of their two satellites so long ago. All ready to be trumped, I thought. There were some space-suited figures moving about nearby, but we didn't take any notice of them. We just thought that maybe some of the Emp's repair squad were still tinkering around. And we went on down.

And we came out of our boat, Vans in front, Wimp next and me behind. A man who was busy at some job dropped his tools and bounded away in great leaps. On Deimos, with almost no gravity at all, one *can* jump, believe me.

We took no notice of that either. Silly of us. Wherever Princess Wimpolo went on Mars there was always excitement. "Our beautiful Princess, darling of all Mars, today made a surprise visit to—"

Pretty soon we'll see a reception committee, I thought. And there will be speeches and flag-waving. Wish I had stayed on Mars. Public fuss-making always made me tired. Especially when it got to the point where they said, "Perhaps now the Princess's husband, that delightful little man, Prince Don Hargreaves, from our sister world, the Earth, will address us all with a few words. I will pick him up and hold him close to the microphone and viewing screen so that you can all see and hear him." Then I had to smile and be nice though I felt mad enough to bite the announcer who was holding me like a baby in the back of the neck. I always had the idea, somehow, that they were laughing at me.

Well, pretty soon that reception committee came. And came fast. About six of them. With rayguns in their hands, aimed at us.

Such bad manners! I could see Wimp was not pleased.

THEY came on and made a ring round us. Then I saw why we had been received so badly. These men were not Martians but Venusians. Those queer, rubbery men from the planet Venus who can stretch their bodies out to something like ten times the proper length. Now I remembered seeing a curious bubble among the other bubbles that covered the surface of Deimos with pimples. Of course! It was a ship of the Venusian Space Patrol. Still hunting for the pirate Belangor and what was left of his cut-throat crew, most likely.

Of course, the Venusian patrolmen could not be expected to know who we were. I plugged the telephone of my space suit into Wimp's and explained to her. Vans could see for himself.

Only, you see, none of us could talk Venusian. I tried to by signs, but didn't have much luck. They didn't seem to want to be friends. They made sure we had no rayguns, then pointed towards their ship and beckoned.

I would have gone, but not Vans. He stood with his hands on his hips and I could see he was saying, "But I don't want to go that way." The Venusians did not understand. But they understood when he first pointed at our boat and then began to leap towards it.

An elastic arm shot out and held him in mid-air, then pulled him back like a ball on a rubber string.

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I saw Vans' face go red. He was asking, "Was that an accident or did you mean to do it?" I could see by his lips.

Nobody answered. Nobody understood but me.

So Vans tries to hop away again, and gets hauled back again.

So Vans turns, slow and quiet. He tries to spit on his hands but can't because of the space-helmet over his head. Then, without seeming at all in a hurry, he hits that Venusian a smacking uppercut.

Now, you can't hurt a Venusian by hitting him. Vans knew that. Punching them is like punching something made of rubber. Your fist sinks in, then rubber straightens itself out again and no harm has been done. Even the gigantic strength of Vans Holors could not hurt them.

I wondered what Vans' idea could be. Then I saw.

The mighty strength of Vans Holors, even on Mars, could throw a Martian hundreds of feet up in the air. Here on Deimos, with almost no gravity at all, he could throw any body to a simply terrific height.

And so I saw. That Venusian just went up and up and up, getting smaller and smaller, till he got so small I lost sight of him, and then there was nothing up there but black space and glittering stars.

Then the other Venusians started to get their rays ready. But they got in each other's way. And Vans was too quick for them. His fists swung and swung. Five more meteorites rushed up from the surface of Deimos. And each one was a Venusian patrolman.

"Come along!" I yelled to Vans, plugging in. "More coming!" Vans stood like a statue, waiting. Then I saw what he was waiting for. One of the Venusians, not hit quite hard enough, was coming down again.

Vans caught him on his fist and mailed him away to some unknown address again . . .

Then we had to hop towards our space-boat mighty quick.

"Vans," I asked, as we got the air-lock shut and blasted off, "did you really have to quarrel with those Venusian patrolmen?"

"Oh, were they patrolmen?" asked the big boob, all surprised. "I thought they were Belangor's stooges!"

"You did, did you?" I said. "You took them for pirates, eh? And now they have taken us for pirates too."

Below us the Venus patrol ship was getting ready to blast off in pursuit. Patrolmen were racing to get through the air-locks before the ship started.

"They can't start till everybody is aboard," I said. "Then they will have to check-up. Some men will be sure to be a long way away and late in seeing the recall signal." (The signal was winking away redly on top of the Venusian ship.) "That means we have plenty of time. Once that ship starts, though, it will soon catch us. We must hide."

"Hide?" snapped Wimp. "Are you gone daft? Where can we hide in space?"

"On the other side of Deimos we can," I said.

* * *

EMPEROR USULOR pointed at the tiny image of Deimos on the telescopic screen and said, with an air of importance, "Cock-a-doodle-doo!"

They had been hunting for the tiny world for two days, and the animal sounds that so often and so rudely interrupted the Emp had got worse and worse. The general was suffering nearly as badly.

"Oh, exactly," said Weil Hektorum. "In fact, bow-wow, hee-haw and meiaw."

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He was getting tired of listening to animal sounds. And now that he tried to imitate them he did it very much better then he expected to.

The Emperor went red.

"Machalorum! Cockalorum! Too-whit Too-who!"

"Well," said Hek, "that last was an owl. The other two have me beat. Still, I can answer. Cuckle-cuckle! Twit-t w i t ! Warble-warble. Cluck-cluck. Twitter-itter-itter-itter. The song of the nightingale," he explained proudly. (He really named a Martian bird that sings very sweetly. I always think of it as the Martian nightingale.)

"Mackafoo! Mackafoo!" bellowed the Emp, furiously.

Then the general came in.

"To-whee! To-whee! To-whee!" he sang sweetly. "Barny, barny, barny, come, come, come!"

And added the cries of still more animals and birds.

"What is this?" asked Hek, impatiently. "Can't either of you talk sensibly just for a little while?"

"Twiddle-iddle whampee whampee?" inquired the general patiently.

"Gruna-gruna! B o l a b - b o l a b!" snapped Usulor, impatiently.

"This gets worse," groaned Hek to himself. "Can't get any sense out of these fellows at all. Won't they talk like humans or *can't* they?"

He wrote on paper, "What's gone wrong? Neither of you two has spoken like a man for more than a day. All I can get out of either of you are bird and animal noises."

Usulor and the general read and looked furious.

"Wangee wangee!" roared the Emp. "Groballa groballa!"

"Kalangee, kalangee!" whistled the general.

"Hopeless," sighed Hek. Then, desperately wrote again on his paper. "If you *are* trying to talk, then for the love of Mike write it down."

Usulor read, and wrote: "What the blazes is wrong with you? It's you two who are filling the boat with silly imitations of animal noises. For the love of Pete drop this silly game and be sensible. I've had enough of it."

And the general wrote: "What are you two trying to do? No matter what I ask you all I get back are queer noises. If it is a game it has gone on too long to be funny."

HEK read them both. The great brain was working.

Then he wrote: "Does my voice, too, sound to you like animal noises?"

Both of the others nodded quickly.

"Then, gentlemen, we are all suffering from a curious affliction. Our voices are gone! Our voices sound all right to ourselves, but really they are strange sounds such as we have all been listening to from the others. From now on whatever we want to tell one another we must write it down."

"Do you mean to tell me," wrote Usulor, "that I too have been behaving as daft as you two?"

"And me too?" wrote the general.

"You have," wrote Hektorum. "But from now on don't talk too much or we shall run short of paper."

"Barney, barney, tooral!" said the Emp. What he meant was, "And get writer's cramp too."

And then the radio joined in the argument.

"Ahoy there, Martian space-boat! Who are you? Answer or we fire!"

CHAPTER IV

A Surprising Visitor

IN THE other boat Vans and Wimp and I were in a hurry to get away

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from those Venusian patrolmen. Because when they caught up with us they would not be pleased with us for the way Vans had pushed six of them off Deimos into space. Most likely they'd shoot first and ask questions after.

"Hide on the other side of Deimos?" asked Vans.

"Yes, that's my idea," I said.

Vans gave a funny sort of snort.

"Well, what would you do? Where would you go? Do you know a better 'ole?" I asked him.

"No, I don't," he said. "But that one ain't much good."

"Why not?"

"Because of those fellows."

He pointed out of a window.

Out there we could see three of the men that Vans had sent on such unusual high jumps. They were circling round Deimos in various irregular orbits. One shook his fist at us as he floated helplessly by. Another aimed a raygun, but was too far away to hurt.

"I see what you mean," I said. "Those guys will see where we go and tell their pals."

"Got through that thick skull of yours, has it?" asked Vans.

"Well, what would you do?"

"Capture one of those fellows out there. Make him tell his pals on the radio who we are."

Which was plain common-sense. Queer how the most sensible thing to do is usually the last you think of. None of us could speak Venusian. Therefore, we must capture a prisoner and make him an interpreter. Easy! We hoped!

So Vans, in his space-suit, stood in the airlock, a long rope with a noose at the end in his hands. The idea was to lasso a Venus patrolman as he drifted by. But lassoing an object in airless space is not easy. Your noose just goes right on past the object instead of falling on to it. Vans missed every time.

"That stunt's no good." I told Vans. "No use trying to loop them in. Have to fish for them."

"Yeah? And what bait will you use?" he asked.

"I shan't hook them, you dumb hippo," I said. "Hooks would tear through the rubber of their suits, let the air out and kill them."

"And what will you do?"

"If you would only help me with this big electro-magnet I wouldn't be long," I said.

He got the idea at once. Soon we had that electro-magnet on a rope and threw it carefully towards the first floating figure. We missed the first shot. There was not a lot of iron about those suits, and the magnet had to go close to them to take hold. We kept throwing.

"A bite!" said Vans at last. We hauled carefully on the rope.

It was a man in a stiff, all metal suit that we had caught. Smaller than the other Venusians. And the nearer we got him the more sure I was that he was not one of the patrolmen that Vans had knocked off Deimos.

I told Vans so.

"A sergeant or captain or something sent out to fetch them in," he said, still hauling.

—

THE man, if man it was, turned and looked at us. Instead of a glass helmet he had a metal head with eyeholes. Something or other in his right hand he kept pointed at us while he hauled himself towards us along the rope.

We stopped hauling. There was no need. Our fish was landing himself. Trouble was, I was not quite sure whether we had caught the fish or whether the fish had caught us.

Then he reached us.

"Lumme! Stuff me for a pickled pole-cat!" I gasped. "If it ain't Adam Link!"

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"Jumping jam-jars!" said Vans. "A tin man!"

It was, in fact, a perfect robot. By robot I mean a machine that looks like a man. An imitation man made out of metal, wires, wheels and so on, with a brain of its own. I never saw much sense in robots myself. Why make imitation men when Nature has already made lots of men much better than your imitation men are ever likely to be?

Anyway, when you meet a robot in the flesh, I mean, in actual fact, the look of him don't taste nice, in a manner of speaking. Sends nasty shivers up and down your spine. Because a robot don't have no way of showing his feelings. He looks at you. He might be just going to ask you to have a drink, or he might be about to sing a song, or he might be just planning to murder you. You can't tell. You can't tell whether he's mad or happy. He's more pokerfaced than a poker, more inscrutable than a Chinese Mandarin is supposed to be, or was supposed to was before the Japs started to show hom inscrutable they could could be, all beaming smiles till they suddenly whip out a dagger and stab you in the back.

Anyway, you see what I mean. You are never sure you can trust a robot. I don't wonder Adam Link couldn't get himself accepted as a human. There ain't no feeling of companionship about a robot's company.

Anyhow, this particular tin man nods his head at the door of the airlock and points. He wanted to go inside. He might have been asking us nicely to let him in or he might have been giving orders. You couldn't tell.

Anyway, in we all went.

Wimp's eyes bulge, and she says, "Who's your friend?"

"A visitor from another world," said the robot, in Martian.

It made me jump to hear him speak, although of course I should have expected it. The voice was dry, whirring, metallic, with a sound like a scraping phonograph needle in it. Just what you would expect.

"Look here," I said, "are you Adam Link?"

"How did you know?" whirred the robot.

"I've read all about you," I said. "You have no business to be here. I've a good mind to tell Mr. Binder!"

"Pfff! Him!" said Adam.

"I think you are disrespectful to a very clever and popular author!" I said.

"And so what?" asked Adam, casually sucking down electricity from our batteries and blowing out a cloud of sparks.

"It's my opinion, Adam," I went on firmly, "that you are a rogue at heart, and so cunning that you have even fooled your creator!"

"My creator!" repeated Adam. "Go on. You are quite amusing."

"You two seem to be old friends," said Wimp, coldly. "When you have a moment to spare you might tell us about it. And what you might do about those Venusians."

ADAM and I had been talking in English, which of course she and Vans do not understand.

"Sorry," I said. "This tin man is from Earth. His name is Adam Link. The fact that he can talk English proves it."

"Absolutely," said the robot. "Who can talk English except Adam Link? If you could talk English you would be Adam Link. According to him."

I don't like sarcasm, especially from a tin man.

"How did you get here?" I asked.

"Easy. Robots don't have to have air. All I needed to get here was a good rocket motor, a device for turning the

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energy of the sun's rays into current and a warm coat of paint."

"And can you help us against those fellows down there?"

"They out to get you?"

"Yes."

He looked.

"The easiest way would be to take Deimos in one hand and the rocket-ship in the other and bang them together."

"Yes, of course, Adam," I said hastily. "I might have known you would get out of the jam some way like that. But we don't want to hurt those fellows. They're our friends really."

"Making things awkward, aren't you?" asked Adam. "Then you'll have to hide."

"We thought of that," I said. And explained about those Venus patrolmen that Vans had set so untidily sprawling all over the space around Deimos.

"Is that all that's troubling you? asked Adam. "Give me six paper bags full of paint."

It seemed funny, but we did. And Adam, when the first Venus patrolman floated past, carefully threw the paper bag. It was a perfect shot. Adam's mechanical brain had calculated perfectly. The bag hit the Venusian full in the face, and burst. Very soon all the human satellites of Deimos were blinded with paint.

"Beautiful work!" I said to Adam, as he came in.

"Would have been," he said. "If I had not missed with one bag and it hit the door and burst and covered me with paint. But one of your patrolmen had drifted back to Deimos, so that I had enough bags all the same."

By now the rocket-motors of the Venus ship were heating up, so that we hadn't much time. We slipped round to the other side of Deimos, took our little space-boat into the air-lock of a large bubble and sank her in the lake.

It seemed odd to be pushing around so easily an object weighing quite a few tons, but in the gravity of Deimos it was quite easy.

CHAPTER V

Paint and Pirates

AND while all this was going on Wimp's poppa wasn't having such a good time either. To start with, Hek and him and the General had clean lost their voices and could only roar like lions or growl like bears or scream like parrots or make other noises that you don't expect from a reasonable human unless he's on the stage or broadcasting or amusing a kid's tea-party or in some other place where people can let themselves go without getting locked up for it. For myself, when I first came to the Imperial Palace of Mars I carefully learned the cries of some of the more deadly of the giant Martian beasts and snakes. I used to practise them sometimes in the Palace grounds. It amused Wimp. Especially when her ladies-in-waiting all ran for their lives. But when the guard turned out and turned on the big searchlights and started sweeping the place with deathrays she made me stop it.

But it was not funny to Emperor Usulor. I suppose an Emperor has to look dignified and not be laughed at. I don't know why. And he was very worried. Suppose this whatever it was, that had happened to him, did not wear off! He'd have to go back to Mars and lay foundation stones and attend dinners and inspect his troops and pin medals on generals and not be able to say a word. He wouldn't be able to make speeches. The Emp loved making speeches. More than people loved listening to them. Now he would have to wear a bandage round his neck and

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say he had a sore throat. Even so the rumor would get around and he'd be laughed at. Horrible to think of!

Still, perhaps it would wear off.

True, the same thing had happened to Detective Hektorum and General Dattease. That didn't matter. No trouble to get a new detective and a new general. Retire these two with fat pensions. And medals. "For disabilities suffered in defense of the person of the Emperor." That would sound good. But what the Emperor didn't like was the idea of retiring the Emperor on pension and getting a new Emperor. It's funny. Kings and Emperors say they have such hard times. Speeches to make, foundation stones to lay, luncheons to eat, medals to pin on generals. Yet they seem to get a lot of fun out of it. I never knew one that didn't want to go on playing to the last possible moment.

Anyway, like most Emperors, the Emperor of Mars wanted to go on batting as long as he could. Even if his speeches on the radio did send people to sleep better han any doctor could. And it looked as though this might end his innings. You could have an Emperor with only one leg, or only one arm, or only with one eye. Or even, a blind Emperor. Mad Emperors are so common that nobody notices it.

But an Emperor without a voice! Pffffff!

And while old man Usulor was worrying himself bald like this the radio crackled out the words I told you about.

"Ahoy there, Martian spaceboat! Who are you? Answer or we fire!"

It was taking an unfair advantage. Emperor Usulor could not answer. Nor could Hek or Dattease. They just looked at the radio with their mouths open.

Hektorum pointed to the view of Deimos on the screen before them. Near the speckled black outline of the pirate's old ship, the Ace of Spades, was another ace, the Ace of Hearts. An orange vessel of the Venusian pirate-chasing fleet.

"Baroo, Baroo! Bump! Weezor!" shouted Usulor.

Hek understood that one. It was easy. Usulor was saying "They can't do this to the Emperor of Mars!" or something like that.

"And how are you going to tell them who you are?" Hek asked.

"We don't know what your game is," barked the radio. "We give you ten seconds to answer properly. Funny noises will not help you."

Looks nasty, Hek thought. He got out three space-suits, put one on and made the others understand they must do the same.

THEN they looked at the screen again. No time to waste! A radio-controlled rocket shell was streaming at them. A few more seconds and their boat would be blown to pieces.

They didn't wait to go through the air-lock. They broke the big observation window, jumped into the the hole and kicked the space-boat away from them as hard as they could kick.

Then that shell reached that boat and went off, and what was left of the boat wasn't much use to anybody.

If they had been on the ground Usulor, Hek and the general would have been blown up too. In space it was different. The blast spent itself in the vacuum. There was no air to carry sound. All they noticed was a cloud of smoke that spread outwards and made everything dark. Luckily, none of the bits of the space-boat, spreading out all ways, hit them.

It was minutes before the smoke thinned out well enough for old Usulor to see about him. The boat was gone.

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He had expected that. Hek and the general were nearby. Deimos was near. The three of them were still traveling towards it with the velocity of the boat that now was no more. Blown to bits, the boat was still doing its job of getting them to Deimos.

On Deimos itself the Ace of Spades and the Ace of Hearts lay close together among the glass bubbles. There were other figures in space-suits floating about in space too. He saw two hauled down onto Deimos with magnets on ropes.

Deimos seemed to be turning under him. He was floating in an orbit round it. Then he saw another space-boat. It seemed to be hiding from the Ace of Spades and the Ace of Hearts by keeping on the other side of Deimos.

It looked rather like the spaceboat that Princess Wimpolo had gone on her madcap adventure in. He wished he could speak to it. He tried waving his arms.

Someone stood in the open air-lock of the boat. A man about the size of an Earthling, dressed in an all-metal space-suit. Funny. Another thing he could not understand. He wished he could ask Weil Hektorum about it.

He could see Hektorum, rising like another sun above the horizon of Deimos. The general was at the zenith, arms and legs spread out as though he too was pretending to be the sun.

"Oh, no, no, no! shouted Emp Usulor.

The man in iron clothes had something in his hand, and was taking aim at the general. Something flew. It hit the general full in the head.

Usulor expected to see the general blown to bits. There was a great splash of red. Usulor, horrified as he was, thought that the unlucky general's head had a surprisingly large amount of blood in it.

The general was still kicking. He tried to wipe his helmet plate. Just as though he was still alive.

Then the Emperor saw that he *was* still alive. The red stuff was not blood but only paint.

"Oh, no, no, no, no!" he shouted. "Don't you dare!"

For the man in metal clothes was now aiming at Usulor. But the missile came on. Nothing could stop it.

All at once the entire universe turned green. Bright green. A bag of green paint had struck his space-helmet, covering it. A green sun shone through a green ocean. He could see nothing else. No more Deimos, no more space-boat or iron man. No more Hektorum, rising like the sun. No more Aces of any suit.

FOR some time Emperor Usulor went on floating in space, trying to wipe the paint off his space helmet. He didn't get very far at the job. The hands of his space-suit were not made for a job like that.

At last he felt something pulling him along. What it was of course he didn't know. Then he struck against something, but not hard, and felt hands take hold of his suit. Men were talking in Venusian. Then someone spoke in Martian.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

"I might ask you that," he barked, or thought he did. "Why did you shell my boat?"

Squeaks and squawks of amazement from the Venusians.

"Say!" snapped the Martian voice. "Snap out of it! Making those queer noises like you did over the radio won't get you any place."

Usulor had forgotten that his voice had gone, queer animal noises taking its place.

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Hands began to take off his helmet. Two men were arguing in Martian.

"What I want to know is, if the party we shelled is the same one as the one that knocked our men off Deimos, how did this guy get the paint on him? I reckon there is another boat about somewhere."

"Yes, maybe. But who is this guy that can't talk like a man?"

"Dunno. I thought his boat looked like a Martian boat, but I'm not sure. We haven't seen enough Martian boats to be certain."

"You think this guy ain't at Martian? He certainly ain't a Venusian. And he's much too big for an Earthling. I can't place him yet."

"I ain't heard of any other inhabited planet."

"There may be one all the same. Mercury perhaps."

Then Usulor's helmet came off. The paint had made it stick.

Around him were Venusians and Martians. He had expected to see Venusians only, if this was a Venusian space patrol. And only a few of the Venusians were in uniform. General Dattease was here too, and he tried to tell the Emp how pleased he was to see him unharmed, but all he could get out of him were roarings and whistlings.

"It's right enough, Belangor," said the man. "These guys can't talk like Martians or Venusians or Earthlings. They must be from another planet."

Usulor and the general stiffened at the name. Belangor the space-pirate! With a ship disguised as a Venusian patrol ship and some of his men in captured uniforms!

"Sure they are not stalling?" Belangor asked.

"Certain."

"Find out where they do come from then. Maybe we could do business with this new planet, now that pesky Venus Patrol has made things so hot in this quarter."

Belangor was planning to do some pirating in new fields.

A chart of the Solar System was brought, showing all the planets and asteroids. Belangor pointed to himself, then to Mars. He pointed to one of his Venusians, and then to Venus. Then he pointed at Usulor himself, and handed him the pointer.

Usulor thought, then pointed to one of the satellites of Jupiter.

Belangor whistled.

"Ganymede! They come from Ganymede! And a rich world it must be, judging by this guy's clothes. Ought to be good plunder there. And now I've got my Ace of Spades ship back again. Boys! Get everything ready. We are off to give Ganymede the once-over."

"And what about the other boat?" his lieutenant asked.

"Was there another boat?"

"Well, somebody must have thrown the paint at these two guys. There were three people who landed on Deimos. One was a little guy from Earth. One, the men think, was a woman. And the other was a big fellow, much bigger than either of these two. Where have they gone?"

"Did you see anything of them in your search in the other ship?"

"No, but—"

"Then forget them. We blast for Ganymede."

CHAPTER VI

Wimpolo in Pursuit

WEIL HEKTORUM saw General Dattease splashed with red paint. Then he saw the Emp blotted out with a great splash of green. And all the while, whether he wanted to or not, he was coming closer to this crazy tin man

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whose one idea seemed to be to brighten up the Solar System by throwing paint around.

He saw that the space-boat was the one Wimp had been using, but that did not help him any.

Now the tin man was aiming again, and aiming with a certainty than an ordinary human brain could not equal. Hek realized that he was going to get painted, whether he wanted painting or not.

Plonk! The universe turned blue. But not before Hek had put both hands in front of his face. When he took his hands away he was able to see quite well.

The space boat landed, and the four people in it, counting the robot, tucked it away out of sight in one of the glass air and heat traps of Deimos.

Good. Now to get down to them. And I hope I don't get greeted with more paint, Hek thought.

But how to get down? Well, action and reaction are equal and opposite. His space-suit was made for repair work on the outside of space-ships. It had tools. Spanners, screw-drivers, a hammer and wirecutters. If he pulled them out and threw them with all his strength in front of him the recoil ought to check his orbital speed and allow him to land.

It did. He got his feet on the top of one of the bubbles, skated over it and landed on the far side on the ground, rolling over and over.

Now he was nearly as badly off as ever. Because, in rolling over the paint on the top of his helmet got disturbed and ran all over his face-plate. He was as blind as Usulor and the General had been.

But he had been seen. Presently something jabbed in his back. A plug was pushed into the plug-hole of his space-suit telephone, and a voice said. "Don't try anything."

"Vans Holors!" Hek exclaimed delighted.

"I don't know what your idea is," Holors growled. "This is not the place for animal imitation."

By now I had wiped some of the paint off Hek's face-plate and saw who he was.

"It's your father's Secret Service man," I told Wimp.

"Then why can't he talk sense?"

We got Hek into one of the glass bubbles, got his helmet off, and he wrote on paper what had happened to him.

"Just like my dad," said Wimp. "The hot headed old fool is sure to get into trouble if I'm not there to look after him. As though I wasn't safe enough, with my husband and the wrestling champ of Mars to look after me. What more does he want? Must I cart a whole army around with me wherever I go?"

"Maybe," wrote Hek, "your dad was glad of an excuse for a bit of fun himself. A day or so off from the affairs of state sort of thing."

"Of course he was. Think I don't know my dad? Well, he got more fun than he expected. Serve the old blatherskite right," said this undutiful daughter. "Perhaps after this he'll let me run around without trying to keep me tied to his apron strings."

"And what are we going to do now?"

"Oh, hang about here awhile I suppose. Till those Venus patrol guys have sent my dad home with apologies, as they will when they know who he is. Then we slip out and dive for home too. All my plans for a run round in the Ace of Spades are off. I can't let my dad find out we threw the paint at him."

SO WE waited. And at last we saw those ships blast off.

"That leaves the coast clear for us," Wimp said.

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Then Hektorum wrote something in a hurry.

"Those ships are not headed for Mars," he said.

"No," said the robot. "By their course I would say they were making for somewhere much farther out. Jupiter, unless I am mistaken."

Adam Link had performed a whole series of elaborate figureworks in his head in a few seconds.

"I don't understand," Wimp said.

"I think I do," said Hek. "Suppose those men were not Venus space-cops, as they pretended to be!"

"What?"

"Suppose they were somebody else, disguised, and now have Emperor Usulor in their power!"

"Get Mars at once on the radio on a tight beam," snaps Wimp.

We did, and Wimp demands to speak to high officials at once.

No, Emperor Usulor had not returned to Mars. Neither could the astronomers with their telescopes see any sign of the rocket-blasts of a space-boat taking him back.

"Attention everybody," snaps Wimp. "I have reason to think that my much-loved father has been abducted. The kidnapers, who are disguised as space-cops from Venus, are in two ships. One of those ships is the former pirate-ship, the Ace of Spades. The other looks like a Venus patrol vessel. The two ships are now headed Jupiterward with the Emperor and General Dattease apparently prisoners on board. I am following in a space-boat since the ships cannot be allowed to get out of sight. Every space-ship on Mars that can take off must follow me. Call Venus and get all the help you can."

* * *

IT HAD been a sudden idea to Emperor Usulor to pretend that the general and he came from Ganymede. To say who he really was would have meant being held to ransom for some enormous amount. He didn't want that. It would mean Belangor scoring a big success and, with the money he would get, going in for piracy and murder in a much bigger way. If he admitted they were Martians but not of enough account to be worth a ransom they would have been flung into space to die, two more of Belangor's countless victims.

Belangor, smooth butcher with a smile, was not going to score him if he could help it. So, he told the only other story he could think of, and one that might lead to anything. Usulor, noisy blusterer as he was sometimes, was no coward.

"The Ganymedans," said Belangor, "must be well treated. We must make them tell us where the riches of Ganymede are and whether there are any patrol fleets or space navies to watch for. Ask about the land defenses of Ganymede. What do they use for money. Gold, radium, energy units, platinum or what-not. Are any other satellites of Jupiter inhabited. And so on."

"Aren't you going a bit fast?" asked his lieutenant.

"How?"

"Those guys can't even talk like men."

"Then get someone to learn their language. Go easy as first. Treat 'em good. Pretend we are taking them back home. Later, if they get shy and don't talk plenty, we can turn on the heat. When we've found out all we need, get rid of them."

"Call that a language," growled the lieutenant. "Sounds like a home for wild animals at feeding-time."

"Do it, I say. But go easy at first. Pretend to be their long lost daddies. Now, I'm taking them to my cabin for a real slap-up feed. Bring the officers."

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"All of them?"

"Yes. And see they know their parts. See they smile nicely at our guests. If they have forgotten how to, tell them to practice in front of a glass. Get cracking."

Usulor and the general listened to all this, keeping their faces as blank as two turnips. They were not supposed to know what was being talked about.

Then Belangor, with a bow and a smile, made signs that they should follow him. Neither Usulor nor the general found it easy to smile back innocently at the slimy reptile, but they made it, good enough to pass, anyhow.

Then the two "Ganymedans" had a real tasty feed. The pirate officers were very polite, pushing more and more food at the guests and nearly fighting for the right to fill their glasses.

Then Belangor made a speech. He explained his plans.

"If they won't talk we'll make them talk," he said. "Breaking their finger-joints and a few other tricks." As he said it he bowed and smiled, and all the company bowed and smiled. "So that, either way, it's a one way trip for them."

Amid a burst of applause, bowing, smiling and banging of plates on the table, he sat down.

Then General Dattease rose to reply. Naturally, it sounded like the roaring of lions, the bellowing of bulls and the squawking of parrots. But suddenly, Emperor Usulor caught words. Words nearly drowned in the flood of other noises.

"Rip your lousy throats from ear to ear. Wuff, wuff! Squawk, squawk! Gouge out both your eyes with my own thumbs."

The general's voice was beginning to come back. And he did not know it. Usulor wondered whether any of the pirate officers could hear. They would not be listening so carefully as he was.

The Emp of Mars began banging a plate on the table in applause. Might stop the others hearing, he thought.

All the same, he was glad when somebody came in and said, "Captain Belangor! There is something in the viewing plate we think you ought to see. Looks like we are being followed."

"Followed?"

"Venus space-cops!"

"Let me see!"

"Bet you it's only a meteor."

They all piled out, leaving the food and drinks.

USULOR wrote on a piece of paper, "Your voice is coming back. Be careful," and handed it to the general. The general read. Then Usulor burned the paper and crumbled the ashes.

Then, from sheer habit, he took out his vitamin tablets. Most people in Mars take vitamin tablets with their meals. Without them nobody could live long in a sunless underground world.

The general began to shake his head quickly and point to his throat.

"What?" asked the Emperor, puzzled.

Then he got it.

The general was trying to say that it was the new vitamin that had made their voices go funny.

"Nonsense!" thought Usulor. How could a vitamin do that?

And while he was wondering General Dattease took the whole bottle of tablets of the new vitamin and emptied it into the big whiskey bottle on the table.

Then Belangor and his officers came back.

"Never saw anything like it before," one was saying.

"Such a tiny boat following us," said another.

"I reckon it can't be much bigger than an ordinary space-lifeboat."

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"Must be mad."

"Tired of life I reckon."

Belangor came in.

"What are we going to do?" one asked him.

"Nothing yet," said Belangor.

"But—!"

"When we get a chance to kill some of them Venusians—"

"I wouldn't let them go."

"They may not be Venusians," said Belangor. "In any case, we can't kill them yet."

"Why not?"

"They are so far away that we can only just see the tiny glow of their rocket-jets in the screen. As soon as they saw a radio-controlled rocket-shell coming at them they would turn off their rockets and we would not be able to see them. No. Let them come on. You are not afraid of such a small boat, are you?"

"Can't we put on more power and lose them?"

"Not so easy. Our rocket-jets can be seen an enormous distance away. I'll arrange a trap for them to fall in. Now, gentlemen, a tot of whiskey to all before we go back to our jobs."

CHAPTER VII

The General and the Germ

SEVERAL hours later, the officer of the watch decided that the ship was veering a little off course. He rang the intercommunication phone.

"Woof! Woof! Baroo! Baroo!" he barked at the man who answered. And rang off, thinking he had given quite a clear order.

The man turned to his buddy.

"What's the major playing at? Hear that noise he made?"

"Sure I heard it. Loud enough, wasn't it?"

"What do you make of it?"

"Too much whiskey I suppose."

Presently the major noticed that his order had not been obeyed. He rang again.

"Wallawalloo!" he shouted, furiously.

"Sure, sure!" was the soothing answer. "We'll see to it."

"And what do you make of *that?*" the man asked the buddy.

"Search me," said the buddy. "Didn't seem drunk. I hear the boss wants someone to learn the language of the Ganymedans, but I didn't know they'd practice on us."

Then the major rang again. He was real mad this time.

"Oroof, aroof! Whee, whee, whee, walla!" he roared.

"Sure," was the answer. "And a wang, wang, tiddly pom-pom!"

That made the balloon go up. Because, although the strange vitamin the major had taken had altered his voice he didn't know it. He though his voice was still okay. But his ears were not changed. He heard what the other people said all right.

He slammed down the instrument and charged out.

"You seemed to have stepped on his corns," said the buddy. "He's coming to roast you."

"If you ask me, the major has gone nuts," said the other. "We can't handle this. I'll call the boys."

So that when the major got there a dozen of the crew, just woke up out of sleep, were waiting for him. The major pointed at the first man and bellowed, "Scree! Scree! Bruahhh! Womwom!"

He was saying, "Lock that man in the cells!" Or thought he was.

"Would you mind saying that again, sir?" asked one man.

The major did.

"It's right!"

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"The major's nuts!"

"Put him away and call the colonel."

"Lock him up before he does any harm."

A dozen pair of arms took hold of the angry major.

"Help! Help! Mutiny!" he screamed with all his strength. It did not sound like that.

A jangling bell woke the colonel. With a grunt, he took the instrument, and squawked into it like a drunken peacock.

"The colonel too!"

"What's got loose here?"

"After him, boys!"

The colonel's door flew open, and very soon he was helpless, his arms handcuffed behind him, and flung into a cabin beside the major. The two officers tried to ask each other what was wrong, but soon gave up. Each thought the other mad.

But before the colonel was carried off he managed to set off a secret alarm bell that rang in every officer's cabin on the ship.

"GENERAL alarm! Mutiny!" was the message that pulled every pirate officer, from Belangor to the newest lance-jack, out of bed.

Belangor was awake in an instant. Mutiny, huh? A nuisance that. It was not easy to get reliable new crews. But he would deal with these mutineers in a way that would not be forgotten. Future crews would not mutiny against him in a hurry.

His secret teleview showed him the crew rousing one another. They were carrying their deathrays. He saw one officer come out of a cabin and wave his arms. He seemed to be ordering the men back to their posts. If Belangor's spying television had had a microphone to it he would have thought the officer's voice sounded strange, like the gibbering of monkeys and the braying of donkeys. But it didn't have a microphone to it.

He saw the crew leap on the third mad officer, as they thought, from behind, and carry him off.

"All right," thought the pirate chief. "I'm ready."

Many steps sounded in the passage. Someone knocked.

"Chief! Wake up! Let us in. We have an urgent report to make. A vital matter urgently affecting the safety of the ship."

Oh, yeah? thought Belangor. Do they think they can fool me with that old trick? Once in here they will leap upon me, as they did upon the others.

He pressed a switch.

A hidden deathray swept the corridor. The men in it all fell where they had been standing, without a sound.

Smiling grimly, Belangor came out. A nice collection of dead bodies. This would add to his reputation for terrorism, even if the dead men did have to be replaced. Teach 'em to defy Belangor the Butcher. Or even to think about doing so.

He climbed over the bodies and went to the door of the nearest officer and knocked. The man inside thought it might be mutineers knocking, and called nervously, "Who is there?" Or thought he did. Actually, he made a good imitation of the bray of a donkey.

"It is I, Belangor," called the pirate chief. Or thought he did. What it sounded like inside I don't know. The startled man inside at once played his deathray on the voice through the door. The pirate chief's right arm fell useless to his side as the ray struck it. He fired back, using his left arm, and heard a body fall to the floor inside the cabin.

"Some of my officers on the side of the mutineers, eh?" Belangor thought.

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"Nearly got me, too."

Then three other doors opened at once and three officers came out. At once they began to talk in animal voices.

"Either this is a plot against me or they are mad," Belangor thought. "Mad officers are no use to me." And he turned his ray on them. The three were just wondering what had happened to one another. They were not looking for an attack in the flank from their boss. They just laid down on the floor like tired men.

He wished he knew what was happening. He could hear running, shouting, animal noises, fighting and falling bodies. He listened for the sound of the voice of an officer, any officer, whom he knew. He did not hear one.

All at once he felt lost and frightened. He ran back to his cabin and turned to his spying television.

Wild confusion. Officers being attacked everywhere. Some fighting each other. No two officers together. No sense, reason, or order to anything.

Another group of men came towards his own cabin, but turned back, alarmed, when they saw the bodies of the first lot.

Belangor locked and barred his door in a hurry. It was built to stand a siege. And the cabin had a secret catwalk to a lifeboat.

USULOR and General Dattease looked at each other as the noise and excitement went on around them.

"I seem to have set things moving out there," Dattease said. His voice was nearly normal once more.

Usulor nodded. His voice was not.

"When they find out the trick we've played they may make it nasty for us. Still, we have to take chances in war. That right, Your Excellency?" said Dattease.

Usulor patted his shoulder.

"Whatever comes we face it together," he wanted to say. But couldn't.

"Here it comes," said the general at last.

The door opened. Several grim men were out there, men with torn clothes and blood on their faces.

"Here you, you Ganymedans," said one. "You started this business. This animal voices business. Some of us think it would be best to get rid of you. Before you start any more trouble. What's the meaning of it all? What have you done to our officers? Explain or we make an end of you."

Their fingers played on the switches of their deathrays.

"Shucks!" said the general. "I can explain."

"Found your voice, eh? Well, get on with it."

"It's a germ, a disease," explained Dattease. "My buddy and I were suffering from it, and your officers must have caught it."

"That's it, is it? We understand. But say! Are we likely to catch it?"

"Oh, no. I should not worry about that. If you have not come into contact with any sufferers you are almost sure to be all right."

"But we have. All of us have. Threw our arms round them from behind and carried them."

"Did you really? That was foolish of you. My word! H'mmm! Well, that is awkward."

"Look here," drawled somebody. "Is this disease real bad. If we get it won't we get over it?"

"Oh yes, quite a number of you will get over it with luck. Doctors reckon that one out of every three sufferers gets better if he is carefully nursed and not allowed to get out of his bed on any account whatever. Some of them can even get out of their wheel-chairs after

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about ten years and walk about on crutches."

"Crutches!"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I should not have told you that. That's only worrying you needlessly. That's a long way off. You'll be quite happy, most of you, for several days. Even after you lose your voices it will be days before the disease reaches your brains and you go mad."

"Say! You got over it! And you are not on crutches. How come?"

"Oh, we had the curé."

"Then give it to us. Quick!"

"Sorry. It's all gone."

"Then tell us where to get it. Or else."

"Sure! I can take you to a hospital on Mars where—"

"On Mars! But they'd roast us all if we set foot on Mars."

"They won't," said General Dattease, taking a big chance. "This is Emperor Usulor, Overlord of all Mars. See these papers proving it. See that photo?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Thought I knew him all along."

"What did I tell you?"

"Emperor Usulor," asked Dattease. "If these men all promise to give up pirating and surrender, will you promise for your part to receive them, cure their illness, pardon them and set them up in jobs or farms in your lands in Mars? Most of them would have given up this robbery and murder long ago if Belangor did not have them by the throat."

Emperor Usulor wrote that he would, but only the crew. The officers must be handed over to justice.

And the pirate ship returned to Mars, Dattease at the controls and Usulor at the radio.

"GENERAL," said Emperor Usulor, after, "I have much to thank you for. But for you I might have had trouble in handling that matter."

"Possibly," said the general.

"How can I reward you? You already hold every medal there is."

"Oh, I don't want a medal."

"What do you want?"

"I want a promise."

"A promise? What for?"

"A promise that you will not pull my mustache again."

Usulor blinked.

"Oh, but really! Do you object to that? A little harmless fun—"

"If you tried it you would not think so."

"But really! Well I *will* try it. You pull *my* mustache," said Usulor, boldly.

"Do you mean it?" Dattease could hardly believe it.

"Sure."

"And you won't do anything about it?"

"Of course not."

With a gleam of happiness in his eye, the general took hold of the Emperor's mustache. And he pulled. He put a lot of painful memories into that pull. He might have been training for a tug-of-war match. Usulor was pulled right off his feet and clutched the general's middle to save himself.

"My word, Dattease," as he wiped the tears from his eyes, "I had no idea how it hurt. From now on I promise. No more mustache-pulling."

AS THE general went away, as happy as a schoolboy, Usulor turned to Adam Link. All this time poor Adam had been standing quite still, waiting for somebody to speak to him.

"Thank you for your help, robot. When will you be going back to Earth?"

"You want to get rid of me already?" clicked Adam.

"Well, er, Mars is a planet of human beings. A tin man would be rather out

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of place here. Don't you think?"

"I understand," said Adam. "Earth would not accept me as a human. And neither will Mars. I am not wanted anywhere. Yet, had you said the word I would have captured that other pirate ship for you and the lifeboat Belangor escaped in." Somehow, even his mechanical voice sounded sad.

"No doubt," said Usulor briskly. "But we can get on quite well as we are. I'll arrange a farewell ceremony."

"I must go back," said Adam, sadly. "Back to Eve Link, the only person who understands me. My back is beginning to ache. That screw in my liver has worked loose again. Only she can take me apart with real loving care and put it right again."

"Exactly, Adam," I said. "You have a screw loose in your liver. I heard once of a robot who had a screw loose in his head. Suppose you ever got a screw loose in your head. Think what might happen. That is why nobody can ever really trust you."

"I suppose not," said Adam. And wiped two large drops of oil from his eye-lenses with a piece of rag.

So, very soon after, Adam Link cleaned up his paint, checked up his wires and joints, set his little reaction motor going again and rose up through the thin air of the upper level caverns of Mars out through the great hole out into space, back to Earth.

And, well, let me see. Is there anything else I have to tell you? Oh, yes, that new vitamin. The doctors say it does an awful lot of good if you take to it slowly. Usulor and the others took to it too suddenly. Didn't give their insides a chance.

Well, I am not going to test it. Their say-so is good enough for me. Do you want any?

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 55

Then with a growl, he raised an iron rod in the air and swung it as if to demolish the machine,

"Curses on the Depth Ray—which brought the doom of a world!"

"A world that would have brought its own doom, being rotten at the core!" exclaimed Ilwanna, leaping forward and restraining her husband's hand. "Remember also, Will, without the Depth Ray, we would not be together now!"

"Which is worth more to me than all Le-Mur!" he said.

As his hand reached out for hers and they stood smiling at one another, I knew he had indeed spoken the truth.

BACK ISSUES SCIENCE FICTION MAGAZINES AMAZING & FANTASTIC (1964-1969). ***All issues of S. F. GREATS, MOST THRILLING S.F., SCIENCE FICTION CLASSICS, STRANGE FANTASY, SPACE ADVENTURES, SCIENCE FANTASY ADVENTURES YEARBOOK 1970, SCIENCE FICTION CLASSICS YEARBOOK-1970.*** **(50¢ each). ULTIMATE PUB. CO., BOX 7, OAKLAND GDNS., FLUSHING, N.Y. 11364.**

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JOHN BRUNNER'S GREATEST NOVEL—

THE WRONG END OF TIME

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VALLEY OF THE BLACK SUN

by LEROY YERXA

Here in this valley light became dark under the influence of an incredible black-shining sun!

THE Gypsy girl's soft fingers traced the delicate lines in the palm of Gloria Duncan's hand. The Gypsy's forehead wrinkled slightly and when their eyes met across the table, there was a look of fear in them that made her lips firm and white. An expression of bewilderment that mirrored itself on the faces of Gloria Duncan and the tanned young man at her side.

"Well?" Gloria said. "I came to have my fortune told. What do you see in my future that's bright? Any tall, dark young men?"

She turned to blond-headed Ray Walters, and the deep love in her eyes betrayed her innermost thoughts. At the expression on his face, she hesitated. Walters looked as though he had seen a ghost. His dark eyes were on the Gypsy. Slowly, Gloria Duncan faced the Gypsy girl once more. The thing that had started as a lark for the two of them, had for some reason beyond her ken become dark and sinister.

"I-I don't understand," she didn't know why dread welled into her heart. *"Please, what is the matter with you two?"*

The Gypsy girl beyond the table stood up slowly. She moistened her lips.

"I'm sorry, Miss Duncan. You—have—no—future!"

Gloria Duncan laughed. Somehow, there was nothing else to do. They had come here, Ray and she, because Ebon Vale had gained no mean reputation as a foreteller of the future. Contrary to the world's usual picture of a fortune teller, Ebon Vale was lovely. Even as she stood before them now, swaying against the table, her wide-set blue eyes, the mass of golden hair piled in curls atop her head, made her more a queen than Gypsy.

Gloria had laughed because Ray believed in these silly things the readers of the palm could tell. Now, she laughed again, but the hysterical, frightening ring of her laughter mocked her from the curtains of the little room.

"Everyone has a future. I've paid to find out. I know this is all a joke, but after all . . . ."

She stopped, waiting for Ebon Vale to explain herself. Ray Walters stepped close to the table that separated the couple from the strange girl with the golden hair, chilled by the

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look on Ebon Vale's face. There was too much fear there. Too much certainty. Her words had the ring of sincerity that frightened him.

"Look here, Miss Vale," his face was quiet and earnest, but pale. "Miss Duncan came here because we thought it would be fun. Gloria and I plan to get married next week. With all the emotional strain she is now under, I hate to worry her with foolish things. Be a sport and give her a good future with three kiddies and a cottage with roses, will you?"

He smiled at her, waiting. Ebon Vale's expression did not change. She drew away from them and her head lifted with that slight touch of haughtiness that characterizes true faith.

"You came here because you wished to laugh at me," she answered. "You thought me the dirty, tent-show fortune teller who would take your money and tell you lies. I will not take your money and I *cannot* lie."

"Then you mean . . .?"

"Exactly what I said," Ebon Vale answered through tight lips. *"No one is more sorry than I that Miss Duncan has no future."*

She tossed two coins on the table, turned her smoothly-clad young back to the bewildered couple and walked through the curtains. They stood alone, staring at the two half-dollars they had paid.

Gloria Duncan's fingers groped out and into Ray Walters' big brown palm. She looked up at him, smiling.

"Let's get out of here," she urged. "The darn place gives me the creeps."

There were tears in her eyes as she spoke. Gloria Duncan, for the first time in her carefree life, was deathly afraid.

SCAR VALLEY, Ray Walters had often thought, was the nicest bit of scenery he had ever had the pleasure of driving through. Nearly sixty miles from town and several minutes from the state highway, the rugged walls of Scar Valley were seen by few. They had often come here in the past, Gloria and himself to sit for hours along the Scar River, admiring the sharp, clean-cut cliffs and the green lushness of the valley itself.

There were tales in the little Pennsylvania towns about the "Scar." Simple hill people told their folk-tales of the whimsies, little round-bellied, flame-shaped people who darted up and down the cliffs at night, trying to lure travelers over the steep walls. All these stories made the Scar a more interesting place to visit.

Today, as Walters felt the hard firmness of the steering wheel once more in his grasp, he breathed a sigh of relief. Gloria had settled quietly into the soft leather cushions and was staring over the top of the cliffs and at the sun beyond.

"What a horrible girl," she shuddered suddenly. "It's—it's good to be out in the sun again."

Walters turned carefully, looked at her. Gloria Duncan was the prettiest girl he had ever seen. In three days they would be married. All the freshness of those cool chestnut locks of hair, the warm gray eyes would be his. Every inch of her from slim ankles to the laughing lips would be his treasure.

They rode in silence for several minutes. The valley was nearly three miles long and another five minutes would take them through the high gap that closed it from the world. In spite of himself, the Vale girl troubled Walters. He knew that Gloria was thinking of her also.

"You have no future."

He shivered, remembering the words and what they implied. What in the

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name of common sense could happen to Gloria? She was a picture of health.

Although the Pennsylvania sun still burned high in the sky, a slight haze came in slowly and darkened the valley. Without realizing it, Walters drove a bit faster. Something tense and shadow-like was dropping down over Scar Valley. He switched on his parking lights, he might meet another car on the road.

The haze grew thicker.

"Ray?"

"What is it, sweet?"

"That haze? I've never seen it this way before. It's getting quite dark."

He sat forward on his cushion, eyes glued to the darkening road. Still a mile to go. He switched on the headlights and they cut ahead through the gathering darkness. Ray Walters shook his head.

"I don't like it," he said worriedly. "Almost like an eclipse. There aren't any scheduled, are there?"

She snuggled closer to him in the broad seat, her fingers seeking his arm.

"I don't read the papers," she laughed nervously.

IT WAS getting to be a nuisance now. The darkness had settled completely, making a world of blackness with them in the center of it, a world that something other than common sense told him consisted of Gloria, himself, and that queer girl back in the old house.

"I wish we hadn't come," Gloria's voice was becoming hysterical. "There's going to be a storm. Maybe—maybe this is what Ebon Vale meant . . ."

Ebon Vale! Walters' fingers tightened on the wheel and automatically he pushed harder on the accelerator. His fingers were wet and white beads of perspiration started from his face.

Ebon Vale—black valley! One and the same. The girl's name meant black valley. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

The Scar River came in tight beside them now and the road plunged into the last mile. The canyon was close, twisting out toward daylight and safety. The girl at his side, overcome with terror, clung close to him. High above him on the blank walls of the canyon he thought he saw sudden flashes of flame-like light. They darted up and down against the black curtain of rock.

Far ahead around the last curve, daylight filtered in—the sunlight that he was fighting to reach. One more curve, high above the roaring chasm of the Scar's swirling bed . . .

A lonely pine marked the curve. Ray Walters spun the wheel around, felt the tires spin in six inches of loose sand. He realized with a curious chill that he had been going too fast! They started to turn, to twist toward the edge of the sand-covered rock. He jammed down the foot brake, pulling the wheel around as far as it would go. Gloria screamed. It echoed against the stone walls, hurtling back to them with all the pent-up fear that was in her heart. The car tipped crazily up on two wheels and spilled over the edge of the canyon. It fell end over end into the deep swirling water below.

Through Ray Walters' head, as they poised that one second in mid air, one message pounded home a million times.

"You have no future! You-have-no-future! You . . . have . . . no . . ."

"YOU are safe now. There is no cause to worry."

Ray Walters heard the voice seemingly from far away, and recognized it at once. It was Ebon Vale. He tried to sit up and was surprised to find that no river water soaked his clothing. Rather, he felt as though he had been

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long and refreshingly asleep. Nothing in Ebon Vale's room had changed.

Ebon Vale, cool and lovely, was standing over him. She was clothed in an ankle-length robe of shining, translucent material. It wrapped smoothly around her body leaving the wealth of long hair, the smooth shoulders free. As he stared up at her from the couch, she smiled. Something far-away and haunting in that smile brought him upright, frightened for Gloria.

"Gloria . . . where is she?" He tried to stand up, felt her force him backward with a light touch of her hand and realized that his body was without strength to resist. It was as though a strange spell had been cast over him.

"I told your fiancee that she had no future," Ebon Vale said swiftly. "She was killed when your car went over the cliff."

He forced himself upright, staring at her with angry eyes.

"You lie," he shouted hoarsely. "You—you . . ."

Ebon Vale's expression didn't change. The same look of patience was there. He allowed himself to fall back against the brocaded pillows of the couch.

"Believe me," she said. "It was not my choice that you stay in the Valley of the Black Sun. I am not in control . . ."

"Wait a minute," Walters got up from the couch, stood over her. She shrank away from him as he looked down at her. *"The valley of what?"*

"You were left alone in the Valley of the Black Sun," she explained. "Those who see the sun fade here, can never see it arise again elsewhere. Gloria Duncan is dead, but of the two, perhaps she is the most fortunate."

He clutched the softness of her arms above the elbows and shook her.

"You've done something to Gloria! The black sun business, the wreck. They were *your* doing."

"No! Please release me. I only predict. I cannot force the decisions of the Whimsies."

"Whimsies?" Walters released her, letting his arms fall hopelessly at his side. "Either I'm crazy or you are. *What in the devil are the Whimsies?"*

Ebon Vale stepped away from him, rubbing the red marks that showed on her arms where he had gripped her. Her head dropped forward humbly.

"Perhaps in your world I am crazy," she admitted. "When you hear the story of the valley you will believe me. *They* will convince you."

Ray Walters, feeling that he was about to lose the last bit of remaining sense he had, sank back to the edge of the couch. Could this be happening in the center of Pennsylvania on the banks of a normal river encased by the granite walls of a natural valley? But there was no mistaking Ebon Vale's sincerity. At least to him, she was being honest.

"All right," he said finally. "Tell me the story and what part I'm to play in this crazy business."

"You play no part," she answered simply. "The Whimsies have chosen you to be my mate. You will live here away from the sight of normal man and act as figure-head ruler of the Whimsies, even as I will be their Queen."

"THERE are tone scales and light scales," said Ebon Vale, "that are not audible or visible to human senses."

She sat on the low rock wall of the garden behind the great house, her fingers toying with the stem of a queerly blackened daisy. Ray Walters sat at her feet, conscious of the intense blackness of everything about him. The valley looked the same as it had before, with the difference that everything was

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in black and white. The trees, the land, the cliffs that towered in a distance, were in fine shades of black and gray. His eyes saw no color, even in the girl. She was like a figure cut from black paper and placed there on the wall before him. He listened patiently, trying to find some clue to this insanity.

"Most people consider the Whimsies are part of a fairy tale," Ebon Vale went on. "For many years people have seen them here at night, bright flaming beings, and gone away thinking that they could not actually exist.

"Yet, the Whimsies are very much alive. Some say they are imps of hell, sent here to practice their mischief."

"And you?" Ray asked. "How did a girl like yourself get into this black mess?"

She leaned back against a stone that was higher than the rest.

"The Whimsies chose me because I had come here to live. They changed my vision so that I saw their world in this valley, not my own. Just as, in a like manner, they have changed you.

"The Valley of the Black Sun is as it is, because in your eyes as they now are, a vast curtain of cloud hangs over it. The sun filters through that screen changing it to a light that is not visible to the human eye. If you do not believe, look up."

Walters studied the sky above them. Far to the west a vast ball of blackness was sinking over the cliff. *The sun turned black as night.* Yet the valley seemed to responds to its light, sending shades of gray and black across the opposite wall.

"It will be night soon," Ebon Vale said. "Then the Whimsies will come to take their place here."

The blackness of the sun was gone. The girl stood up, looking pale and lovely against the wall.

"It's all wild—impossible," Walters confessed, "but I'm beginning to believe it. What of the Whimsies? I still know little of the part I am to play."

Ebon Vale's face grew tense. She stepped close to him and her hair, blowing in the dark air, swept from her neck and against his coat. Her arms reached up and around his neck.

"I am alone with you, a girl who is to be your queen," her lips were warm against his. He pulled his head away, startled.

"You still wish to know the part you are to play?" she asked, drew his head down again.

This time he did not force her from him. With the warmness of her pressed to him, lips soft against his own.

For a moment he forgot Gloria and the world he had lost only this afternoon. He closed his eyes tightly.

The depths of his eyeballs suddenly shot white hot fire into his brain.

There was daylight; bright, flashing sunlight in his eyes. He wasn't holding Ebon Vale. In the flashing intensity of the light that cut into him, he saw Gloria. She stood, arms about his neck, staring up at him beseechingly. Her expression of humiliation and sorrow sent him reeling backward. With effort he opened his eyes again.

Ebon Vale was still there, several feet from him, staring with fright at the man before her.

"Gloria!" he shouted. "I saw her. She was here, in my arms."

He was sure now, that Gloria was not dead. Whatever the spell that was upon him, Gloria was alive and suffering. He would for the time being, do as he was told. Later, when he knew something of this wild fantasy he faced, there would be time. There was the small comfort that when he wished, his longing could for a minute erase this

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world in black and white and regardless of its terrors, bring back his own colorful surroundings.

"Okay, my queen," he said with a touch of sarcasm in his voice. "I'll behave myself from now on."

Did he fancy it, or was there a sudden look of intense hatred in the eyes of the girl who took his hand.

"We must go now," she said. "The Whimsies will be waiting."

THE queer black sun was gone. Scar Valley seemed asleep under a black drape of night. As Ray Walters followed the girl down the incline from the old house, he wanted to close his eyes once more; summon that vision of his own world. He thought of Gloria and that look in her eyes of horrified anguish. Ebon Vale had said she was dead. But she wasn't!

The road was short to the cliff. He followed Ebon Vale quietly, depending on her as he would a staff. He had been here before. He and Gloria had sat beneath these very trees, feasting their eyes on the green of the valley. It was changed now . . . dark and dead, like a flat photo in black and white.

He stumbled forward like a man in a deep dream. Ahead, on the face of the cliff tiny flashes of red flame flickered up and faded against the rock. There were more of them now, seeming to fly inward toward the rock wall—converging in a group around the large hole of a cave.

The girl turned, a smile on her lips.

"It will not be long," she whispered. "You need not be afraid."

At that moment fear was far from Walters' mind. Only a curious, dull feeling of distrust. A feeling that Ebon Vale, her body swaying ahead of him like a white torch in the darkness, was planning his destiny alone. The feeling that this world of black was of her making and hers alone. But in spite of every attempt he made to hate her, there came that overpowering attraction to her body.

The forest cleared and across a short stretch of black meadow a great hole opened into the face of the cliff. Through it poured a steady, darting stream of the red flashes he had seen against the wall.

"We are here," she stopped, took his arm and held herself close to him. "You may lead."

Walters crossed the meadow like a man led to his own hell and went down the sharp incline into the cave. Ahead was only blackness. It was broken by the steady flow of the fire-like Whimsies who darted through the air on all sides of them.

From below, warm air and the steady chatter of tiny, musical voices drifted up. He went down, Ebon Vale's hand still tightly clenched on his arm.

Then the cave opened wide and a huge chamber confronted them. Walters stopped short, his eyes wide with what he saw. The Whimsies *were* alive! They had sharply pointed little faces, tiny horns and paunchy bellies that appeared to have absorbed more than their share of food.

They were tiny folk, hardly more than eight inches tall. Their bodies were for the most part, feathery and brightly red. Long, arrow-pointed tails twisted behind them as they swirled through the air.

EBON VALE went ahead of him again, across the open cavern to a huge rock that was carved roughly to seat a human figure. She turned her face to him, sank back into the rock chair and motioned him toward her. The cavern was alive with the light of the Whimsies now. He went forward

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and sank down beside her.

"You need not fear for your safety or your sanity," she said quietly. "Some would call these people my brain children. They are harmless."

The Whimsies seemed wildly excited now. They swirled into a tight circle around the pair and one of them settled to Ebon Vale's knee.

He was slightly larger than the others and his tail spread across her lap and dropped over the edge. He spoke, and his voice was loud and shrill, like a small child's.

"Our queen brings a visitor?"

She reached down and stroked the sprite's head gently.

"I bring you a ruler," she corrected gently. "He will stay with me and help with our affairs."

At once an angry shout went up around her.

"We need no king. Our land is well ruled by you. The affairs of the Whimsies are not for humans."

Ebon Vale held her arm aloft. Anger flashed in her eyes and for the second time, Ray Walters could swear he saw cruel sadism there.

"I wish this man to rule," she shouted. *"My wish is not to be questioned."*

The Whimsie on her knee turned to the flashing horde behind him.

"The valley of the black sun will be ruled as our queen sees fit," he squealed. "You will remain silent."

Returning his attention to Ebon Vale, he continued.

"There are affairs for our queen tonight," his tiny eyes flashed devilishly. "Hearts to be mended—fun to be had—worries are over—the Whimsies are mad."

The word mad—mad—mad went bounding around the cavern on the lips of the tiny throng.

"It's all a damned nightmare!" Ray Walters whispered to himself. *"A crazy, insane dream."*

His head was pounding with the shrill shouting in his ears. He closed his eyes tightly, trying to escape the sound. Then it happened again . . .

At once Ebon Vale was gone. The Whimsies were gone. In the girl's place, seated on the cave chair was Gloria Duncan.

HE WANTED to speak to her, but he couldn't. She sat there before him, in the empty black cave. Her lips moved and he knew she was begging him to free her.

"Take me home," the lips moved freely. *"Please, take me home before it's too late."*

"Too late for what?" he wanted to scream. Something bit sharply into his shoulder. His eyes snapped open with pain. The Whimsie had jumped from Ebon Vale's knee and plunged his hard, arrow-like tail into Walters' shoulder. The girl seemed to be waiting for him, still angry from her quarrel with the Whimsies.

"You are tired?" she asked. Her voice was edged with sarcasm. "I suggest that your eyes remain *open*."

"Yes," the Whimsie settled once more on her lap. "You'll be much more contented."

Something within Ray Walters rebelled.

He wondered suddenly why he had not fought his way out of here long ago. Why he had succumbed so gracefully to Ebon Vale's every wish? He was still sure that somewhere Gloria was waiting for him alive. If he could not force himself from the dream in any other manner, he'd fight his way out.

He stood up quickly, wondering what the reaction would be.

"You grow bored so soon?" Ebon

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Vale arose, to stand before him with flashing eyes. "I suggest you cause me no further trouble. It was difficult enough to obtain you."

"Obtain?" Blind anger came over him. "I don't understand. Did you plan all this deliberately?"

He wanted to turn away. To go from the cave in spite of all she could do to prevent it. The slumberous passion that arose in Ebon Vale's eyes held him as though he were tied. She pressed against him and the warmth of the entire place seeped into his body. Her eyes seemed to drink from his own and as she stared, Walters realized that he was being hypnotized as surely as though he stared into the eyes of a cobra.

The intense desire to sleep came over him. The cave flashed bright with the flame of the Whimsies, and grew black before his eyes. In his sleep nothing troubled him. No visions of Gloria. No black sun.

LIKE a broken record, the voice said over and over:

"I am Akimba—I am Akimba—I am Ak . . ."

"Go away Akimba and let me sleep." Walters rolled over on the rough floor, felt a sharp twinge of pain in his shoulder and sat up. Rubbing his eyes he looked about.

He was still in the cavern, but the place was deserted. Or was it? What about Akimba, the troublesome voice?

He stood up and brushed the sand from his trousers. Yes, Akimba was there. He was the Whimsie who had sat on Ebon Vale's knee. The little red sprite who had ruled the works. Akimba fluttered down from his place on the cave shelf, hit the floor with a thump and strutted across the sand. Now that Walters had time to look him over more closely, the little chap wasn't half as hard to believe. He had legs that were feather-covered, and a small bare stomach. As he walked, he wobbled a little under the weight of his load.

"Too much honey," Akimba said wryly, rubbing his stomach. "Can't leave the stuff alone."

As insane as it seemed to talk with something one couldn't even believe existed, Ray Walters had no choice.

"Where is the girl, Ebon Vale," he asked. "The rest of—of you. Why are we alone?"

Akimba grasped his stomach and pulled it up to the position of an inflated chest.

"They're g o n e," he announced proudly. "I've been assigned to guard you. Three black suns have passed since you slept first. We are to go to our queen now that you have awakened."

The thought entered Walters' mind that here was an opportunity to escape. What possible chance would the tiny Whimsie have to hold him, once he decided to go?

"If you're looking me over with any thought of me being helpless," the sprite said suddenly, "perish the thought or it will perish you. My tail can get mighty poisonous when I want it to."

Walters chuckled.

"Smart little fellow aren't you?"

Akimba snorted.

"None smarter," he agreed. "I even had ideas of being king until you came along."

Hold everything, Walters thought. Perhaps there *is* a chance.

"Just what does this kingship consist of," he asked. "Now that I'm here, I'd like to know my duties."

"It ain't the job it used to be," Akimba's face darkened. "There was a time . . ."

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He stopped suddenly, as though fearing to go on.

"There was a time . . . " Walters prompted. "Go on, tell me about yourself." Akimba settled down comfortably.

"If *she* finds out," he said with a glance toward the door, *"I'll* lose my neck. Well! What the heck, why not?"

AKIMBA talked fast, his tiny voice sounding like a badly tuned flute.

"The valley of the black sun was our home long before Ebon Vale came here," he started. "People have seen us for centuries. We do no harm in our cave and at a distance we just look like fireflies."

"But where did you come from?" Walters broke in. "What do you do here?" Akimba's eyes twinkled.

"Ever hear of Rip Van Winkle and the dwarfs?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, we're like the dwarfs," Akimba went on. "We were here from the beginning, and there just isn't any reason for us. We like it here. No one troubled us until Ebon Vale came.

"You see, she learned the magic of the black sun."

Walters was growing interested.

"How," he asked, "am I able to see your world and the black sun? When I came here before, I never suspected."

"That's a simple story," Akimba answered. "Ebon Vale is a strange woman. No, let me say she is the complex personalities of many women. She came here many years ago and in her heart was the secret of seeing things no other could see."

Walters sat down and crossed his legs. For a moment they were silent.

"Why?" Walters asked, "do you say she is a part of many women?"

Akimbo grinned wisely.

"Ebon Vale would have died a hundred years ago, were she not able to utilize the minds of younger women to preserve her own body."

The Whimsie's words left Walters thunderstruck.

"A hundred—years . . .?"

"Ebon Vale came here two hundred years ago. She came from an eastern country across the sea. She remains invisible until she wishes to regain more youth. Then, with her secrets, she draws young girls to her side and takes from them what she wishes."

In Walters' brain there surged the memory of Gloria Duncan. How, at times, when he closed his eyes, she and not Ebon Vale was before him.

Then this was the explanation. It was not Ebon Vale at all that was beside him, but Gloria Duncan, imprisoned within the Gypsy's body.

Akimba was growing impatient with the pause.

"Well," he asked, "what more does the mighty, but helpless king wish to know?"

"The black sun?" Walters begged. "Tell me about it. Why do I see it?"

Akimba shook his head sadly.

"That I do not know. It is some sort of spell that Ebon Vale casts upon you. I think you humans call it hypnosis. I understand little, except that without it we Whimsies would be rid of all you humans, and could dance about the cliffs to our hearts' content without bowing to a queen and king."

He spat the last words out as though they were very distasteful to him.

IN Ray Walters' mind a plan was slowly formulating. A plan that might be wild, but not nearly as fantastic as the things he had just listened to.

"How would you like to be free?" he asked suddenly. "How would you

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like to be rid of both your queen and myself?"

Akimba's eyes danced with joy, then his face darkened.

"Can't be done," he said. "We've tried."

"Give me a chance," Walters begged. "I'd do anything to get out of this nightmare myself."

Akimba thought for a long time. His tail danced about restlessly.

"All right," he said finally. "Go ahead, and welcome. What do I have to do?"

"Just get me out of this place," Walters answered quickly. "Show me the way back to Ebon Vale's house and I'll do the rest."

"You can't find out her secret," Akimba cried. "She'll kill us all."

"How?"

"With her magic." Akimba was truly distressed. "She makes us bring her food, clothing. She makes us frighten all people away so that she may have the valley to herself. If we don't do it, she'll destroy the screen that brings the black sun and we will all perish."

"Listen to me, little man. This valley protects you and her, because your eyes are tuned to the screen that makes it dark and safe. To us humans who come here every day there is no black sun. It is the bright sun, splashing down on green and brown and all the colors of the universe."*

* Let no thought of fantasy enter your minds so far as the 'black sun' is concerned. There exist, beyond the approach of the human eye, certain light rays that are invisible. Experiments create *artificial* black light. Yet there can be no doubt that it is *possible* for black light to exist in a natural state; in other words, light that we cannot see with the eyes we now have, and yet would be clearly visible with some other type of eye.

Watch a dog some time as he stops suddenly in his track and starts barking loudly at some object that *in our eyes* does not exist. Is there any proof that it does not exist in the dog's eyes?—Ed.

Akimba was properly startled with this statement.

"You don't mean that Ebon Vale has been lying to us That she has no power over our world?"

Walters nodded.

"I mean exactly that," he said. "If you existed for centuries before she came, why should you depend on her now?"

Akimba stood up, stomping his feathered feet angrily.

"What are we waiting for?" he shouted.

RAY WALTERS was almost upon the old house before he could see it through the black mist that covered his eyes. Akimba, anxious and worried, he left behind at the cave door. Once, just before he opened the door to the old house in the valley, Walters closed his eyes. Sun flashed in them and the valley was green again. Daylight blinded him and he opened them quickly.

Somehow Ebon Vale's spell only partly worked on him. It was on her failure that he must depend. If, when the struggle came, could he close his eyes tightly enough?

The door opened protestingly under his hand. The huge room at the front was empty. He could hear a silvery voice, singing somewhere beyond the door. Opening it slowly he saw Ebon Vale as lovely as ever, standing with her back turned to him. She turned, as though sensing his presence.

He went to her, clenching his teeth. She tried to catch his eyes with hers, but he looked straight at her throat and riveted his gaze there. Her arms went about him, holding him close to her. For that next instant he fought off the desire to look at her face; her smooth cheek, her deep eyes.

A shiver ran through him and he re-

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membered that this was not a girl, but a creature who ruled the valley with youthfulness stolen from others.

Closing his eyes tightly, he concentrated on seeing Gloria Duncan. He heard her gasp with surprise as his arms went around her waist. Then, as she screamed her hatred, he pressed his lips tightly to hers.

The brilliance of a thousand suns seemed to strike him directly in the face. Light tore through his head, pounding against every nerve in his body. He opened his eyes.

He saw Ebon Vale, as lovely as she had ever been. Her body, tense and fighting at first, gradually relaxed against him. Her eyes were vague in his sight. He could only see lips and soft, waving hair. The face changed. The pain went from his head and it was as though he was gradually awakening. Coming through the darkness into the light, and the light felt good once more.

He knew she was drawing him back and that she was no longer frightened, but determined. The couch was behind them, but before he reached it the face close to his began to change. The features of Ebon Vale faded. In their place were the blurred, lovable dimples, the faithful eyes of Gloria Duncan. He held her closer, breathing a prayer for what was taking place. Suddenly they were falling, together, through space.

WHEN Gloria Duncan awakened that morning in City Hospital, she was radiantly happy once more. She looked around her at the clean curtains, the spotless walls.

"Ray!" She raised her voice gently.

Walters sat beside her smiling. His eyes were covered with a bandage.

"Yes, Sweet. Feel better this morning?"

She sighed, stretching back comfortably on the smooth pillows.

"Much, Ray. I'd like you to tell me something."

For a moment fear ran through him. Fear for what she might know. He steeled himself.

"Go on," he urged. "Ask your questions."

Gloria sat up, leaning on one elbow.

"Doctor Saunders says they found us lying unconscious in each other's arms, on the river bank," she said. "How did we escape?"

"I think in the excitement I must have pulled you out of the water and then passed out," he answered.

She smiled at him tenderly.

"Doctor says I'll have these bandages off my eyes in a couple of days," he said. "I can't understand what happened to my eyesight. He says that I was stone blind when they brought me in. A film which he can't describe, is already fading away."

Ray Walters took her hand in his, after fumbling for it.

She said: "We're safe, the fortune teller was wrong, I *have* a future. That's all there is to it."

"I wish that *was* all there is to it," he said softly. "They couldn't locate Ebon Vale when they went for her. There was some talk about finding the body of an old, old woman in the house where she had been."

Walters held her tightly against him.

"It's like the old fables of the firefly Whimsies," he said. "You can't believe the things the old timers say about Scar Valley. It's a breeding place for myths."

"It was odd," Gloria breathed as he released his hold on her. "I had sure a mess of conflicting dreams until I regained consciousness here. You know, I *saw* those Whimsies you mentioned. . . ."

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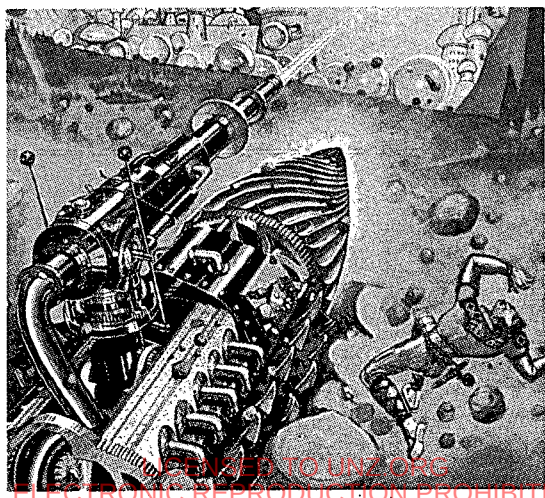

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